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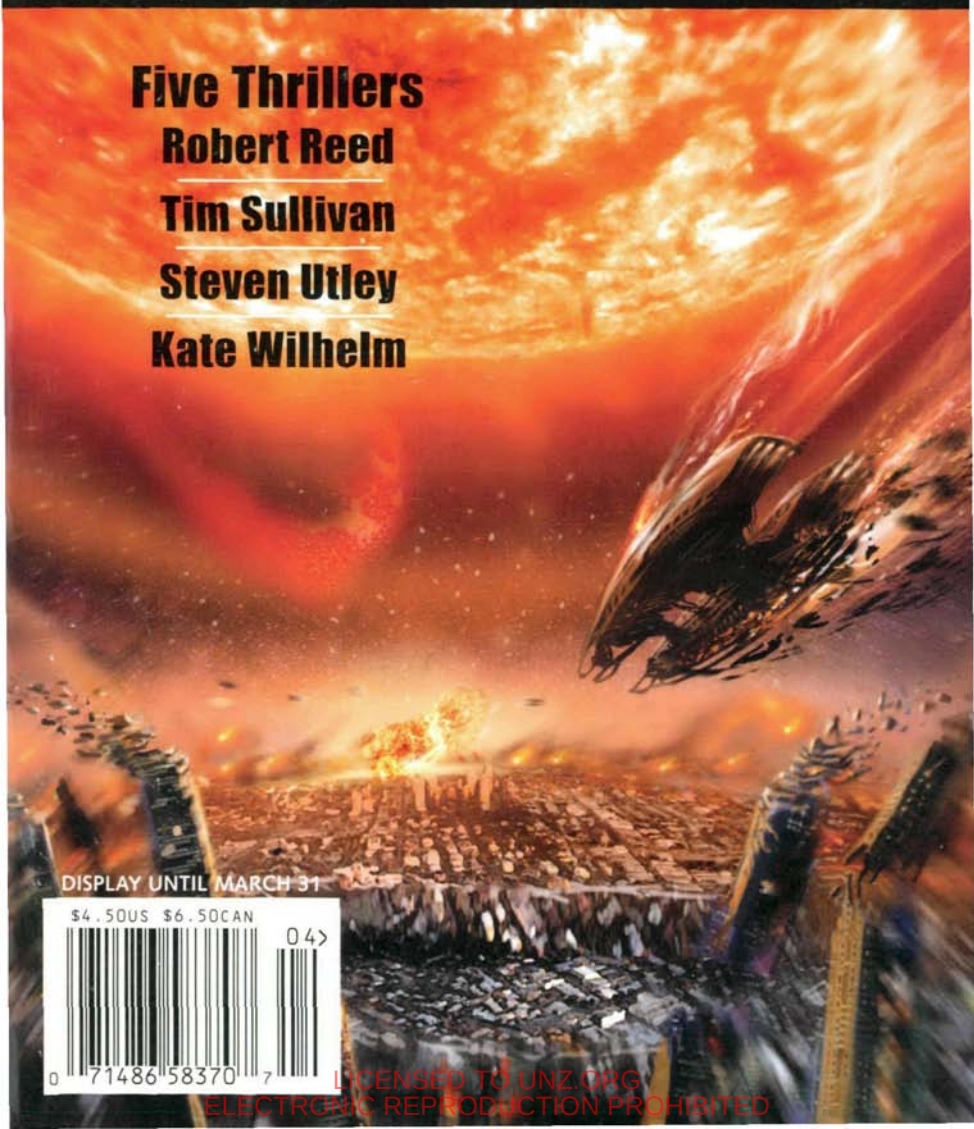

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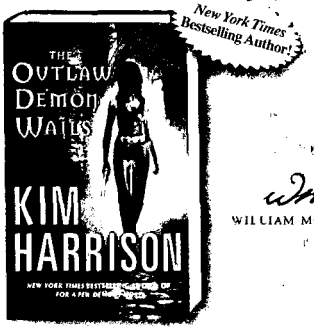

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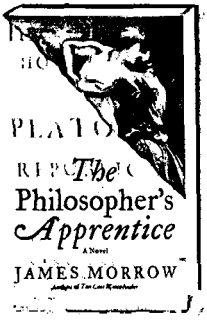

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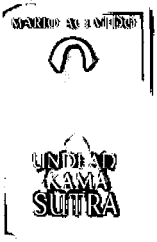

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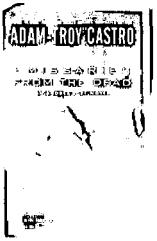

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 114, No. 4, Whole No. 671, April 2008. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99; $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Jersey City, NJ 07307, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2008 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
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James Stoddard is the author of The High House *and* The False House. *He lives in Texas and owns several first editions, but none like the books our narrator encounters in this fantasy.*

The First Editions

By James Stoddard

IT IS SAID THAT EVERY person's life is a book unto itself, a statement that is true, as I learned while on a business trip to find a source of latching gears for my coatpin factory.

Departing from my home village of Giom, located across the border from France, I took the train through our tiny country of Aquitanita and soon arrived in Dumon, the capital city. It is always a pleasure to journey there, to see the moss-encrusted *haciendas*, the splendid palaces, the soldiers in their royal garb.

My quest for raw materials proved successful by the second day, and I was in high spirits when I chanced to hear of Yon Diedo, a gentleman rumored to possess the largest library in all Dumon. As I am also an ardent collector of books, I determined not to leave the city without paying him a call.

Messages were exchanged through the hotel concierge, and the following evening I found myself riding in a post chaise beneath the shadowed archways and ancient walls of the great city. Wide avenues

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turned to cobblestone streets, which gave way to dusty roads as the carriage moved farther and farther into Dumon's outskirts. Storm clouds covered the sky, so that darkness had fallen by the time I reached the entrance of a vast stone mansion enmeshed in cascades of ivy. A servant, wearing the brown, loose-fitting garments of his caste, stepped from beneath the doorway.

"Good evening, sir. Welcome to the manor of Yon Diedo." Without waiting for my comment, he turned to the coachman. "You can be on your way. Return transportation has been arranged."

I gave the servant a questioning glance.

"It is the custom of my master," the man said.

"That is very gracious and highly unexpected."

The servant shrugged. I paid for my fare and followed through halls rich with the scent of burlwood and roasting meat. To my delight, for my ride had left me ravenous, I was led into a small chamber with a claw-foot table loaded with a repast of wild boar, sauteed potatoes, herb bread, and Antierian wine.

My host soon entered, wearing a scarlet cape and short yellow doublet. A powerful man, with deep-set eyes and a heavy brow, he bore seven individually braided mustachios. He had a deep, smooth voice and an accent I could not place, but which I assumed originated in the South.

"You will forgive the lack of festivity," Yon Diedo said, as soon as we had shaken hands and seated ourselves at the table. "I am a scholar. Entertainment for me is solid food and the silence of study. Alas, I am also a bachelor, so there is none of the tender sex to provide lighter diversions."

I shrugged. "I am unmarried myself, though my sister shares my household. Your home is both beautiful and inviting." Yet, even as I spoke, I realized his manor was neither. And despite his pleasant voice, something about his eyes made me uneasy.

"Ah, but you are young," Diedo said. "There is plenty of time for marriage."

I smiled at the compliment. "I have had my share of living in my thirty-odd years."

"Then you must tell me of it," he said, raising his glass, "for I am a student of the lives of others."

Wine, the great pacifier, soon washed away any disquietude I felt

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toward my host. Yon Diedo was a man who knew how to draw others out. I was soon telling him of my youth in tiny Tien Manaar, of my father's work in the copper mines there, and of my own labor within those same mines until my rebellion at fourteen, when I set out to join the army in Itlan with but a water flask and half a loaf of bread. I told of returning home after serving in the war, of working in the factories of Oscoga, and of eventually founding my own factory in Giom.

My story told, the last shred of boar eaten, I set my glass aside.

"I have gone on far too long," I said, waving my hand. "I fear I've been tedious."

"To the contrary," Yon Diedo said, with great earnestness. "you have lived more in the last fifteen years than many men do in sixty. You should write a book."

"I fear my love of literature does not include the penning of it. But perhaps, if we might...."

Diedo smiled. "Ah, my library. Yes. I have kept you waiting long enough. Come this way."

We stepped through double-paneled doors into the largest and most beautiful library I have ever seen. Its walls, floors, and shelves were of burlwood. It was built like a great wheel, with a circular central chamber and dozens of outlying rooms — small alcoves really. An enormous hearth, decorated with stone minotaurs and Aquitanitan cherubesques, curved along one side of the main room, its stones glowing from the heat of a happy fire.

Yon Diedo smiled smugly as I gaped.

"So many volumes!" I cried. "Unbelievable."

"There is no love like that for the printed page."

I strode to the nearest shelf. "You have Kephrin! And Invaldres! This volume, I dare not even breathe upon it. It is priceless."

"Yes, those are quite valuable. But I have books beyond value as well, one-of-a-kind volumes kept in a special section. Come and see."

I followed into one of the alcoves, an agreeable nook with a small hearth, a quilted rug, and a spacious, comfortable chair with reading lamp and table alongside. A peculiar buzzing noise arose when I first entered, as if an insect circled the room, a sound that subsided too quickly to be located.

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"These are my special treasures," Diedo said, "shown only to those I deem worthy. I often retreat here to lose myself in my reading."

I studied the volumes, but my brow soon furrowed. The spines displayed only the writers' names, not the titles. "Yon Diedo, forgive my ignorance. I recognize none of these authors."

"Nor would I expect you to. Only one copy exists of each of these books. Sit and I will show you."

I sat in the chair, which seemed to wrap itself comfortably around me. Each of the volumes had a single eye looking out from the spine, but despite that uniformity the books were of all colors and sizes, some ornate, some plain, some of leather and many of cloth.

Yon Diedo eyed me carefully. "Each volume is an autobiography of the most personal kind, all unabashedly frank, revealing those secrets most would never tell. The writers bared all, withholding nothing."

"Truly?" I asked, disappointed. Such *faux*-biographical books, supposedly relating the adventures of a real person, were quite common. But I had anticipated more than the ribald tales so popular with the unlearned.

"You are unimpressed." His face twisted with unexpected rage, as if I had committed some unpardonable effrontery, the change in his demeanor so violent I recoiled in the chair.

He instantly mastered himself, his voice smooth again, but the suddenness of his return to good humor chilled me even more than his anger. I abruptly realized how vulnerable I was, seated, my host blocking any escape from the alcove. I remembered how far I was from home.

Yon Diedo chuckled and shrugged. "Should I expect you to be impressed? No, not at all. But perhaps you will be more interested if I tell you I am a sorcerer."

I laughed uneasily. "Yon Diedo, you make sport of me because I am from a small village. Such superstitions — "

My words remained unfinished. Diedo made no movement, spoke no spell. A flash of jade light passed over his eyes.

My sight grew unsteady. I found myself lying on my back in the chair, my head level with Yon Diedo's knees. Chuckling, he reached toward me, his groping hand covering my vision.

Then Yon Diedo picked me up and held me in his grasp. I found myself looking down at his feet, unable to see his face.

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"You have told fascinating tales of your life," he murmured, as if to himself. "Yet, you will tell me so much more."

I felt the pressure of his hands upon my sides. And then he *opened* me. I heard a soft creaking, the slight shuffling of paper. With numb horror I realized I had been transformed into a book.

"Yes," he said, pleasure in his voice. Though I could not see his expression, I could feel his eyes upon me, studying my contents. "You will make a worthy addition. I have given you a great honor, Jakob Mamolok. The chance of a lifetime. How fortunate you are."

I screamed; I cursed; I implored him to change me back. If he heard he gave no answer — my voice had become no more than a shuffling whisper, emanating from somewhere between the pages.

He shut me; I felt my sides snap together as I closed. He pulled me upright. From the single eye on my spine I could see his arm and face once more, but the hand that held me, being too close, was blurred. He lifted me somewhat higher than his head, and I felt pressure on both of my sides. Releasing me, he stepped back, leaving me at what seemed the edge of a precipice. Seeing dark wood above and below, I realized I had been placed on a shelf with the other volumes.

He beamed at me like a child, apparently pleased at my presentation, heedless of my supplications. And yet, a moment later, his face writhed as if in torment.

"My collection," he half-whispered in a tone of dread or disbelief.

He turned and rushed from the room.

I wept in fear, trembling like a dog terrified of the thunder. There were other sounds around me, but I was too agitated to hear. I do not know how much time passed — an hour, half a day — it was all one to me in my pain, but finally I grew calm enough to recognize a woman's voice; emanating from nearby.

"Please," she crooned, "I know it's a shock, but you must calm yourself. You are not alone. We're here. We are all here."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "Where are you? I can't see you."

"I'm right beside you. You can feel me touching your side."

"I...Beside me?"

"Yes."

She was right. I *could* feel her against me, a gentle warmth.

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"I am a fellow prisoner, Janine Laroque."

"Why has he done this?"

"Because he is a collector of stories. And what greater ones than those of a human life laid out in detail? In the evenings, he comes to read one of us."

"This is madness. It can't be happening."

"You will discover it is quite real. You will learn to accept it."

But despite her efforts at consolation, I was too overwhelmed to listen. Nor could I bear to learn of the particulars of my circumstance. Fortunately, though no longer human, I still retained the ability to sleep, and I soon blotted out the horror of my condition by escaping into the sanctuary of a deep slumber.

I awoke to the sound of Janine singing *Two Silver Pesatas*, a popular tune from four years before. She had a lovely voice, and for a moment I thought myself still in my comfortable inn in the heart of the city. Only when I opened my single eye and stared out at the narrow alcove, my vision flat and one-dimensional, did I recall my situation. From my vantage, I could glimpse a patch of morning sun emanating from an unseen window, warming the burlwood walls in the library's main room, but my vision was otherwise restricted to the surrounding shelves.

I moaned.

"Hello," Janine said. "Are you better?"

"How can I be?" I asked.

When she did not answer, I said, "I'm sorry. It is a shock."

"It is," she agreed.

"What will become of us? What of my work? My business. I need to return home."

"You must forget your home. You can never go there again."

"He can't keep us here forever!"

"Books and sorcerers share one thing in common: they can both be destroyed, but they never die. I have been here for only two years, but there are volumes in this library seven hundred years old."

"What can we do?" I asked, horrified.

"We can become friends. You haven't introduced yourself."

I told her my name.

"Very well, Jakob Mamolok. You have a good feel about you — a strong cover and a stout binding. You're a dark-green leather, you know."

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"What do you look like?"

"You can tell, as long as we're touching. We see not only with our eye. Feel my cover against you? Concentrate on it."

No sooner did I comply than I realized I could indeed sense her. An image more tangible than any ordinary mental picture rose in my mind. I saw gilded pages and red leather embossed with ornate scrollwork, a magnificent book, one a collector such as myself would have lusted to own. She was beautiful, this Janine Laroque.

She laughed sweetly, as if sensing my thoughts. "I think we will become good friends."

After a moment's silence, I asked, "All these books, all of us, are here solely for Yon Diedo's entertainment?"

"For his pleasure and for our degradation."

"What do you mean?"

"Look inside yourself. No, I mean no common metaphor. You are a book now. Look inside yourself. You can do so, even as you were able to see me. Shut your eye. Turn inward. Concentrate on the center of your being."

At first, I did not comprehend what she meant, but after several tries I saw within my own pages. I could scan the words; I could skip from page to page. Everything was there: my thoughts, my dreams — and my humiliations and cruelties. Nothing was omitted. I inwardly blushed to see my lowest desires in print.

"Yon Diedo will read me?" I asked.

"All of you," she said bitterly.

THE FIRST DAYS in the library were the worst. I spent every waking hour seeking a way of escape, and when its impossibility became clear, I thought I would go mad. Perhaps, if not for Janine's guidance, I would have. She helped me deal with the limited depth-perception brought on by having only one eye. She showed me how to move by rippling my cover, an action that propelled me forward by the barest fraction of an inch. She taught me how to feel the musty air of the library, the warmth of the surrounding books, the dark wood of the shelves. But most of all, I was aware of her cover, lightly touching my side.

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Hers was a sweet, discerning nature. She was talkative, and unlike myself, little given to brooding. If she had not entirely accepted her lot, she had learned to deal with it, day by day.

The other volumes welcomed me as a new friend — fresh pages, they called me. I received greetings from everyone. I could only converse with the books immediately surrounding me — even our loudest shouts were minuscule — the buzzing I had heard when I first entered the library had been the books crying out to warn me — but the library had a system of passing messages from volume to volume, so that books from every part of the alcove sent their best wishes. It was impossible to learn everyone's names at first, though I assumed I eventually would. A library has nothing but time.

I quickly became acquainted with the books around me. Major Tamwidge, who had hunted in Namibia, sat to my right, with a shelf support standing between us so we did not touch. Beyond him stood Professor Andover and Ernest Dawkins. Arturo Villareal rested to Janine's other side, and I could not help but wonder, with a twinge of jealousy, whether their covers pressed as closely as did ours.

On the shelf immediately below us stood the Bonne triplets, a trilogy of older women with theosophic leanings. To their right was Katrina Voletta, a reformed lady of the evening, though whether she reformed before or after becoming a book, she did not disclose. Beyond her rested Parson Niemoller (who was literally a man of the cloth now). On occasion Miss Voletta was caught in the midst of furious debates between the parson and the triplets.

The books generally slept from midnight until dawn and would drowse again through the heat of the afternoon, waking at evening when Yon Diedo came to read. He would light the lamp, choose a volume, and prop himself in the comfortable chair for two or three hours, often chuckling as he read. Occasionally, he perused non-living books, and was a great enthusiast of Baron Karkonolf, an author I consider unbelievably dull. Sometimes he would not read at all, but would sit contemplating his collection, rising to dust a volume, to tap it gently into place, or simply to hold it a moment, his hands caressing its cover and spine, his expression rapt in admiration.

Contrary to my expectations, he did not begin reading from me at

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once, and I began to wonder if he intended to do so at all. To my surprise, the thought made me resentful. He had, after all, brought me into his library. Was I to be nothing more than an unopened volume? Yet, I dreaded the idea of him reading me as well.

When he at last took me from the shelf, I found it ghastly. Bad enough to be handled by his smooth, meticulous hands, I had not realized that as he scanned me, I would feel myself being read, hear the words in my mind, know exactly what part of my personal life he plundered. I struggled to shut myself until his fingers trembled against my efforts.

"My friend," he finally said, "the fireplace is at my feet, and a book can be easily burned."

For an instant, I considered letting my pitiable existence end. Yet, I feared the flames, and by that time I had taken some comfort in the society of the other volumes. I ceased my struggles and he finished his reading.

I sighed in relief as he closed me. He turned my spine to face him, and I saw tears glistening in his eyes. He ran his hand along my cover.

"Jakob," he said, his voice taut with emotion. "I must apologize. I am truly sorry. I shouldn't have threatened you. It's just — you have such a beautiful cover. And such wonderful words. Your phrasing...all my books are so beautiful. So lovely. You should be satisfied here. You *will* be satisfied. Think! How often have you longed to spend your days in such a library, in the company of good books? And these are the best of books. You can read them; they can read you. Idyllic. The slow turn of library days. I have given you what you always dreamed."

He beamed at me, his face childlike as a cherub's. But his expression crumbled, taking on a haunted look.

He glanced across the shelves, his lip curled. "Filthy collection. Filthy books. Would I had never seen them."

As he returned me to my place, violated, humiliated, I had no doubt that we were in the hands of a madman. He departed immediately after, but not even Janine's kindness could cheer me.

"Has he read you often?" I asked.

"Nearly every night at first."

"Did you ever get used to it?"

"Never," she said. "And pray you never do, Jakob. Among the books are those who learn to enjoy it. Let us never become as those."

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Perhaps I was not as interesting as some of the other volumes, for Yon Diedo soon wearied of me. But it may have only been that his attention shifted to a new prisoner. He led her into the little room exactly as he had done me, an extraordinarily beautiful woman whom I later learned was the Contessa du Maurier. She and Diedo spoke warmly, even flirtatiously. I thought perhaps he intended to court her, but instead; once he had seated her in the comfortable chair, a jade light enveloped her. Her laughter died into the dusty corners of the bookcase. She became a slender volume with brightly colored pages.

"Such a shame," Janine said. "She was so lovely."

"No more beautiful than you," I said.

"Oh, Jakob, how would you know?"

"Why, by your cover, of course."

She laughed to conceal her embarrassment, but I felt her turning warm against my side.

THE DAYS PASSED and my affection for Janine grew. She was my oasis, my sanctuary. One would imagine our being constantly together would grow tiresome, yet her wit, vitality, and good nature always pleased me. There came an evening, after Yon Diedo had spent his hours dipping into a seventeenth-century Englishman who had served under Oliver Cromwell, that she and I did not sleep, but talked late into the night. Moonlight through the window in the main library illuminated a section of its floor, leaving our bookshelves in shadow. The library lay silent, save for the settling of boards and our own, papyrus-small voices.

"I suppose this is to be our lives," I said, staring into the shadows with my single eye. "You and I moldering together on the shelves?"

"You won't mold," she said. "Yon Diedo is careful with his collection. And if a bookworm comes for you, I will squash it between my covers."

I laughed. For the first time since beginning my strange imprisonment, I felt suddenly contented, as if I were a man again, the library's owner rather than its captive.

"Perhaps it won't be so bad," I said, "sitting on the shelf, spending my days here. As long as you are by my side."

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I felt the heat of her blush. "You make too much of me, Jakob. You have been through a terrible ordeal. I was the one who helped you through it, that's all."

"It goes deeper than that," I said, lowering my voice so the others could not hear. "You have become more than a friend — at least, for me. I wish we had met outside these walls. What adventures we could have together."

"You mustn't talk this way."

"Have I misread us?"

"I...you don't understand. I have loved my time with you, but it can't last. The sorcerer occasionally shifts the entire collection to provide us with variety."

"Because he cares so much for our well being?"

"We are his obsession. But whatever his motives, a day will come when we will be separated. You mustn't expect too much."

"I see," I said, stunned by the thought. "I don't want us to be parted."

"Nor I, but we must anticipate it."

After a moment's silence, I said, "Then let's at least enjoy this evening. Tell me all about you. I want to know everything."

She hesitated. "And I, you. Perhaps...." Her voice faltered. "I would be willing...would you, perhaps...like to read me?"

The question surprised me, for I had already learned that allowing oneself to be read was singularly personal. This differed from reading *to* another book, which was done all the time, sometimes to all the surrounding volumes, as if one were giving a recital. Janine and I had read to one another several times. But to actually read a companion's pages was an act of deep friendship or love.

At my hesitation, she blurted. "I didn't mean all of me, you know. Just select passages. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have — "

"No," I said, embarrassed. "Please. It would be an honor. It's just, I don't know the custom or even how it's done. Do we take turns?"

"It can only happen when two books are touching. We do it together. You must think of the pages you wish me to read, as will I. It just happens then. It's all quite natural. Just concentrate on a single page at first."

I looked inward and found a humorous incident from my childhood on page twenty-three.

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"Perhaps this one," I suggested.

She gave me her page ninety-seven, an account from her teenage years. I gasped as her page sprang to my mind, vellum-white with golden letters — Janine was beautiful inside and out.

We read together, a brief passage, and it was the most intimate experience I had ever known. Her soul lay before me, captured in lines rhythmic as poetry. More than the words, it was the order and the shape, the letters and punctuation, the sentences and paragraphs, the way her thoughts rose and fell. It was an ecstacy, holy and wonderful. At the same time, I felt her partaking of me. She murmured in delight as she read me; I basked beneath her approval; our thoughts intertwined in the reading. Our covers touched lightly; I felt the passion of her soul.

Her page finished at the end of a sentence.

"I want to see the next one," I said.

"No, not that one."

"Please. We could — " I concentrated, trying to turn her page. She struggled to hold me back.

"No, Jakob. You're hurting me."

"Please, Janine, I — "

She gave a cry, abruptly ending the contact. I felt sudden mortification.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to. It was so overpowering."

She said nothing.

"Forgive me," I pleaded. "Please."

After a moment, she replied, her voice calm. "The fault is mine, Jakob. I should not have allowed it. It was too soon. Come, let us speak of other things. I read of your childhood. Tell me of it."

We talked until the moonbeams climbed high up the far wall of the central chamber.

The days passed and our love grew. After our first awkward encounter, we read regularly from one another, and as our trust increased we enjoyed more personal passages. Not all, of course. The only one who ever read everything is Yon Diedo. Only he has seen my page 126. Bad enough that I burned crimson as he scanned the text, but he laughed as he read.

But I did not show page 126 to Janine, and she kept her own secrets as well, saying a woman must have her little mysteries.

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As the weeks passed, I gradually began to accept my new life. Sitting on a shelf sounds dreadfully dull, but as long as the company is good, books possess a wonderful capacity for repose. I found myself looking upon my former life more philosophically, wondering about my constant hurry and impatience. I enjoyed reflecting on my own text, seeing how the path of my life, which had appeared random before, now seemed orderly, almost planned. But perhaps its being written down only made it appear so. I tried not to spend too much time looking within, however. More than one volume had become obsessed to the point of narcissism, living within itself, no longer interacting with the other books. Only in the library of Yon Diedo could one learn everything there is to know of one's self.

I participated in grand discussions, sometimes with one or two other books, sometimes with nearly the whole library. These latter could last for days, with points and counterpoints being passed from book to book all around the library. It sounds tedious, but it was exhilarating. So many fine minds! Some of the books were learned, some less so, but Yon Diedo had chosen his library well, and there were no vapid volumes. I mingled with orators and princes, theologians and philosophers, scientists and socialists. Others, despite having little education, were treasuries of experience, wisdom, and wit. A poet from Arana, an Ottoman mercenary, a Persian merchant, a former slave from America. A library of great books.

Out of all the wonderful volumes, the one exception was a large book of battered leather, bare of any name. We called it the Gray Book. It never spoke to anyone, though it muttered almost continuously to itself. None knew its history, except that it had been there longer than any of us. Some said it was a sorcerer Yon Diedo had conquered. Some said it was his first victim, grown mad through the centuries. Diedo never placed it beside another book, but kept it apart, between two plain, wooden bookends. Everyone, even the earliest captive, agreed that Yon Diedo never read it. In fact, he seemed loath even to touch it.

After several weeks of captivity, the dreaded reordering of the books occurred. Our captor arrived early and began moving the volumes with studied care, humming as he worked, sometimes addressing us.

"Ah, Minuet," he said to one fat volume. "Petite Minuet. How lovely you look this morning. What a beautiful young woman you were when I first acquired you — how long ago? Five hundred years? Has it been so

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long? If not for me, your beauty would have faded. But here you are, as comely as ever. And such good stories! Perhaps I will dip into you later this evening. But for now, what if I place you beside Mr. Whitbourn? He tells the most devilish tales! I think you and he will get along splendidly. And your *confidante*, Lady Albrecht, can sit to your other side."

"All my old friends," he muttered, picking up another volume. "I want you to be surrounded by the most pleasant of company, so you will be content."

When he came to us, he seized Janine first. I struggled with all my bookish strength to hold her, as if I still had arms. The results were pitiful; I could do no more than wriggle my covers. I shouted in my loudest voice, a bare flutter. He lifted my love high into the air, then brought her down to the lowest shelf at the end of the nook. When he seized me, I burned with such hatred toward him I thought it must surely scorch his hand, but he paid no heed. I was placed on the highest shelf, far from my beloved.

"I will put my two newest acquisitions together," Yon Diedo said. "Perhaps you will find something in common."

I stood between two other books, our covers lightly touching. I recognized the volume at my front as the Contessa du Maurier. The other turned out to have been a captive longer than any other volume save for the Gray Book, an elderly tome, twice the thickness of the others, entitled Edward Dawson, though everyone knew him as Captain Steed. We were close to the Gray Book — only one other volume stood between it and the Contessa, and even from my position a foot away, I could sense the malevolence pouring from that unholy tome.

The library had a custom, after what we called The Shuffle, of reintroducing ourselves to our neighbors on every side, after which we were each expected to relate one story from our past. In deference to his age, Captain Steed was asked to begin, and told an absorbing tale of his passage as a young midshipman to Easter Island. The book on the Contessa's other side, Archibald Winters, took his turn next. He too had been to sea, and related a fantastic episode of an encounter with a kraken. In the midst of his telling, the Contessa whispered to me, "Believe none of it. I was a row above him before. A notorious fabricator."

"Really?" I was surprised. He had a sonorous, genuine manner.

"Can a book as slender as he have lived such adventures?"

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"Actually, I can't see him."

"I have. He is no wider than a little finger." Her pages rustled, which is the laughter of books. "Don't be fooled, my friend."

The Contessa told a charming story of her triumph over a particularly wicked rival in Paris, and I gave an account from my military days. I would have enjoyed these tales immensely, if only I had been able to share my delight with Janine. As it was, our separation left me heartbroken.

The days that followed were not as those before. Janine and I tried calling to one another, but it was impossible; I could scarcely hear her, much less continue the intimate conversations we had previously enjoyed. We passed messages, but it was not the same.

Captain Steed, while affable enough, was several centuries old and prone to repeating himself. But the Contessa proved a most interesting companion, and we spent many hours together. She had a droll wit and a way of leading people into conversation, making them feel that she held them in high esteem. Though she lacked Janine's sweet nature, she was much more sophisticated. Nor could I forget how beautiful she had looked when she first entered the library.

She often spoke of escape, especially after being read by Yon Diedo, a humiliation that made her so furious that her pages curled. At first, I tried to console her, but she only turned her wrath upon me, and I learned to leave her alone at those times.

One evening, following such a reading, the Contessa displayed an unusual fragility.

"Jakob," she said, pressing her back cover against me as if for sanctuary, "we must find a way of escape. I won't have him putting his hands on me, knowing my every thought."

She wept in the only way books can, moaning, her whole frame shuddering convulsively. The cries of a strong woman have always affected me deeply, and if I had possessed arms, I would have wrapped them about her.

"Come now, Contessa," I soothed. "It is all right. He may abuse us, but he can't take away what we truly are. How can I help you?"

"Oh, Jakob. Tell me a story. Let me read your pages."

I had not meant for us to become intimate, but in that moment of

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sympathy, I let her scan a page of my text, and she gave me a page of her own. And then we were reading one another hungrily, taking in every letter and mark of punctuation. Hers was a world filled with the marvelous and cosmopolitan.

Thus, the Contessa and I became lovers in the only way books can. And if I felt guilt at giving myself so soon to another after my separation from Janine, I reflected that I was but doing what I must to survive in that bizarre prison.

In the nights, the Contessa and I sported together. Competitive, she loved proving her superiority, sometimes at my expense. Nor did she hold a high opinion of the other books, despite having met so few of them. But in the day, she often spoke to Archibald, the volume to her other side, the one she had earlier labeled a braggart. When I asked about him, she simply gave the bookish equivalent of a shrug (the slightest movement at the top right hand corner of a page).

"It means nothing, dear Jakob. He thinks he impresses me, not knowing how I scorn his pomposity. One must find amusement where one can in this dreadful place." Despite her assurances, I burned with jealousy.

In response, I pushed to read more of her, as if by doing so I could utterly possess her. Sometimes she allowed it; sometimes she refused, pretending no interest. Or perhaps it was not pretense. Whatever the case, it felt like punishment. Only my pride kept me from begging for her attentions, for I knew that if she ever reduced me to that point, I would become an object of her ridicule.

One evening, when she had treated me with particular neglect, I heard her and Archibald talking far into the night. The light flooding through the window into the main chamber attested a full moon. Though I could not discern what they said, I despaired, thinking I had lost her affections. I was drifting into a black, mournful sleep, when I became aware of the sounds of movement. Rousing, I found the Contessa stirring beside me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"You're awake," she said. "Excellent. Help us push."

"Push what?"

"Archibald. We must move him toward the Gray Book. It's the only way."

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My pages fluttered. "Why does he want to go there? What — "

"Help us," she ordered. "I've no time for questions."

Time being our greatest commodity, I thought that a peculiar answer. Nonetheless, I pressed with all my paper might.

Movement is difficult for a book, but we set our pitiable strength to the task. It proved a grinding effort, as we struggled through the long hours. Finally, when the moonbeams slanted into the farthest corner, I heard a delicate *whoosh*.

"What was that?" I asked.

"We've done all we can," the Contessa said. "Archibald has tipped against the bookend holding the Gray Book."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because we require an ally if we wish to escape. Why does Diedo keep the dark book separated from the rest of us? If it were once a sorcerer, as some say, it might help us."

Though unable to make out the words, I could hear Archibald speaking to the Gray Book and the volume answering with guttural replies. To captives, tiny rebellions take on great significance, but I could not help but wonder if our actions had been wise.

"Read me, Jakob," the Contessa demanded. "I want to celebrate tonight's victory."

I read her far into the morning hours.

BY DAWN, the entire library knew what had happened. Through messages passed along the shelves from volumes with a better view, we learned that Archibald remained upright, leaning lightly against the bookend, the top of his cover touching the Gray Book. The two of them conversed continuously, but Archibald ignored any questions from the rest of the shelves. The books fell into furious debate, some arguing that he should withdraw at once, others wanting him to discover the truth concerning the mysterious volume.

"Has anything like this ever been tried before?" I asked Captain Steed.

"None of us were ever placed close enough to reach the Gray Book," he replied gruffly. "And it shouldn't have been done now. The book is evil. I would have tried to stop you if I had realized what you were doing."

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Yon Diedo did not come to the library for the next two days. This was not unusual; like all men he pursued his hobbies when time allowed, but it was unfortunate.

In the afternoon following the day Archibald first spoke to the Gray Book, he began to whimper in an animal whine.

"What's happening?" I demanded.

"I don't know," the Contessa replied.

We called to Archibald, but he did not answer. And still the Gray Book murmured to him, its voice increasingly caustic.

By the second night, Archibald began screaming, a frail, thin noise like that of a book being eaten by silverfish. The entire library began shouting, begging him to push away from the vile text, but if he heard he gave no answer.

"If only he'd stop," the Contessa moaned. "He's driving me mad."

Eventually, Archibald did cease his cries, but only after his voice reached a continuous wail ending in savage abruptness. Into the silence rose a shuffling sound. From the corner of my vision, I saw a pair of objects flash past, the bookend and Archibald. My eye involuntarily shut at the impact of his body slamming to the floor.

Nor was the ordeal over, for its contact with Archibald had roused the Gray Book, and the Contessa soon gave a choking whisper.

"Jakob, the book tries to reach us."

Nothing happens quickly in a library, and this was no exception. Throughout the night, we listened, sleepless, as the Gray Book struggled, emitting a rustling, whining noise I hope never to hear again, a cross between the grunts of a pig and the screams of a horse.

Around three o'clock in the morning, the noise grew louder. Apparently, something had impeded the Gray Book until then; it had either been marshaling its strength, or had needed to overcome some type of restraint. Whatever the case, it now moved toward us.

"You must protect me," the Contessa urged. "You must."

There was little I could do, but I spoke to Captain Steed, sending word down the line to see if there were room for flight. We had some difficulty; Van Gelder, the fourth volume down, was a nihilist who insisted we were in no danger since nothing really existed. (Perhaps not an extreme philosophy for one turned into a book.) But at last we convinced him to

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comply. With four inches of space between ourselves and the side of the shelf, we began a slow retreat, hoping to buy time until Yon Diedo appeared.

The night passed; the pale light of sunrise tipped the library walls, and still we fled. All the while, I felt a palpable aura of malevolence emanating from the direction of the Gray Book.

"Tell them to hurry," the Contessa cried, over and over. "It's getting closer. Oh, you must save me."

Some of the others, discouraged by our shuffling flight, would have faltered completely except for Captain Steed, who proved himself a true leader. Through encouragement and remonstrances, he spurred the volumes to their greatest efforts.

The Contessa and I required no such incentives. The Gray Book was so close we could hear it whispering; though the phrases it spoke were nonsense, they filled us with indescribable dread, as if at any moment they might become words too horrible to bear. If, I thought, in some obscure age the book had once been human, it must have given itself to such complete evil as one never meets in the sunlit streets of the world.

At last, toward evening, our flight ended. Word came down that we had closed the gap; there was nowhere left to run. The Contessa, nearly mad with fear, kept crowding against me, as if to bury herself in my cover.

The murmuring of the Gray Book was closer now. Though I could not see it, I imagined it towering above the Contessa's corners, looking down upon us. I felt sick with the weight of its malice.

"Trade places with me!" the Contessa demanded. "Shield me, Jakob. Don't let it get me."

She, who had always appeared strong, panicked. Despite my fear, I would have tried to help her, but getting between her and the Gray Book was impossible. Even if there had been enough shelf space, it would have taken half a day.

The next hours were a purgatory. My mind began to wander; dreadful visions assaulted me, horrors I will never attempt to describe. I did not believe there could be such hatred in the world.

As the evening sun faded from the library, a bitter cold pierced my spine.

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"Jakob!" the Contessa screamed. "It touches me. Oh, please, make it stop."

At that moment of despair, Yon Diedo entered. A buzzing cry of alarm went up from the entire library, loud enough to startle the sorcerer. He hurriedly lit the lamp above his chair and turned to examine the alcove. When he spied the Gray Book pressed against the Contessa, his brow grew inflamed.

He picked up the awful volume as one might grasp a serpent, touching it only with his thumb and forefinger, moving it safely away from us. Retrieving poor Archibald, he thumbed through him and set him aside, then picked up the Contessa and read her final three or four pages.

"Vile witch!" he cried. "You think *me* evil, who am but a collector."

He picked me up next and scanned my last pages. Only then did I realize that our stories did not end when we were changed into books; we grew to include our experiences in the library.

"Poor dupe," he said to my open pages. "But not so foolish as Archibald."

He returned me to my place and picked up Archibald's silent form. Opening his pages, Diedo furiously displayed them to all the books, walking up and down the aisle, turning from side to side so everyone could see.

Every page was blank.

"This," Diedo shouted, tears of either rage or sorrow in his eyes, "is the fate of those who encounter the Gray Book. It drains the life from its victims. Did you think I kept it separated from you for any reason other than your protection? Archibald is ruined! Ruined! Such a magnificent volume!"

He took Archibald, and laying him carefully upon the fireplace grate, built a pyre and consigned him to the flames. Removing Pastor Niemoller from the shelf, Yon Diedo read aloud from him as the book was consumed. His voice broke more than once during the ceremony, and when it was done he sat in the chair, weeping with his face in his hands. But whether he felt pity for Archibald or merely mourned the loss of a rare volume, I could not tell.

When he had grown calm once more, he rose stiffly and addressed the library in a subdued voice.

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"I am sorry, my friends. The fault is not yours, but mine. The Gray Book, for reasons I will not divulge, must remain in the library. But I was careless, leaving it too close to some of you. I had thought...I had hoped...that the kindnesses I have shown you would be appreciated: the way I rearrange you so you can experience a variety of companions, my careful placement to prevent any book from being too crowded, my constant vigilance against foxing, mold, and insects. I mend your pages; I watch for your safety. But not all appreciate my efforts. I can understand that some of you are new here, but I tell you, sometimes I grow weary. A collection is not an easy burden. A little consideration would be appreciated, a little policing of yourselves, so I do not have to do it for you."

He strode from the room, leaving the books murmuring.

The library held a memorial service of its own immediately after. Archibald had made many friends, and wonderful eulogies were passed around the shelves. Under the Contessa's influence, I had apparently misjudged him, whose stories may have been more true than she had suggested.

The Contessa, overwrought by her terror, demanded to be comforted. That night I read her again, but with a new eye, realizing for the first time that despite her protestations she was one of those Janine had spoken of, who enjoyed being scanned by a man with Yon Diedo's power and wealth.

I COULD NOT BE content, thereafter, but longed for the days spent with Janine. I still found the Contessa compelling; despite her self-absorption, she was a vibrant, extraordinary woman. Men are not always wise in these matters. But the evil of the Gray Book made me long for the goodness of my friend.

To make matters worse, we were shuffled a week later. Any small group of people creates its own society, and in our library those societies rose and changed with each rearrangement. Some were gracious; others less so. Some turned acerbic.

I was placed between a watchmaker from Stockholm and a dancer from Vienna. For Diedo to have chosen him, the watchmaker must have possessed a rich, inner life, but it was one he never displayed. Sullen, withdrawn, he scarcely spoke a dozen words in all the time I knew him.

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The dancer tended toward an unfathomable esotericism wrapped around her art. She also had a streak of cruelty and a dagger-tongue that spared no one. Only a bright young boy on the shelf below and a circus acrobat from the shelf above made life bearable. But altogether, we were a sullen group. Having lost even the amusement of the Contessa's company, I began to despair.

Two weeks of this convinced me that I had to take action. I decided to work myself forward until I stuck out enough to draw Diedo's attention. Noticing me, his curiosity would surely compel him to read my final pages and discover my desire to be with Janine. If he had pity, he would place me beside her. But if he proved cruel, I might find myself exiled from the others or even given to the fire.

Still, I was determined. I began early in the morning, pushing first with my left cover, then my right, waddling my way forward. By the time Yon Diedo arrived that evening, I had succeeded in writhing out almost an inch. His hands wandered over the shelves as they often did, preparatory to his choosing a volume. To my dismay, he casually patted me back into place. I roared in frustration, but if he heard me, he gave no sign.

Three days in a row I followed my plan, but each time he returned me to my original position.

I decided my scheme had not been bold enough and resolved to push myself until I careened to the floor. Yon Diedo would surely read me then. This was a dangerous strategy, however, as I had no way of knowing if I could survive the fall.

I began in the early evening, while Diedo was still reading, knowing I would not be far along by the time he left. He departed without noting my efforts, and I spent the rest of the night creeping toward the edge. I ignored my companions' inquiries, especially those of the dancer, who had been particularly disdainful of my previous efforts.

"Message from Janine," a book on the shelf below called to me in the early morning light. "*What are you doing, Jakob?*"

I glanced across the shelves. The last reshuffle had brought Janine and me only slightly closer. She was positioned on the third shelf up, but at the far end of the alcove, while I sat higher, in the middle section.

"Getting Diedo's attention," I said. "Trying to reach you."

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As I continued my exertions, I heard my message passing down the line from book to book.

"*Jakob, don't do it,*" her reply came back. "*You'll be killed!*"

I laughed sardonically. "You call this living? But I won't die."

I tried to sound more confident than I felt. She implored me, but I refused to give up. Others sent messages as well, words to encourage or dissuade me. A few feared upsetting the sorcerer. Captain Steed informed me that several books had made similar attempts in the past, only to suffer broken spines or dented corners. I thanked everyone for their concern and kept to my task. Shortly before Yon Diedo's normal hour of return, my weight shifted forward and I toppled, top down.

Though the fall took the barest second, it seemed an eternity before I bounced onto the floor. The pain was not as dreadful as I had imagined, more akin to a bad dive into a pond. My spine tingled, but I could still see, and my edges remained uncrumpled.

Janine's voice flowed down from the heights.

"Jakob? Can you hear me?"

Momentarily forgetting what I was, I tried to raise an arm in triumph, an effort that caused my cover to flap the barest fraction, bringing cheers from my fellow books. I shouted my reassurances, then lay waiting for our captor's return.

Perhaps the sorcerer was not as insightful or as curious as I had suspected, for upon seeing me on the floor, he clucked twice, showing none of his expected anger. His moods, always unpredictable, ranged daily, even hourly, from sullen to exuberant.

"Jakob Mamolok, what are you doing? Do you think you can run away from home? Where would you go?"

Chuckling, he picked me up and examined my spine. "No harm done," he proclaimed, placing me back on the shelf.

"Read me!" I yelled. But he gave so sign of hearing.

I fumed that evening while he browsed the pages of a trader from Cathay. But before Diedo departed, I began creeping forward again.

By the next morning, I noticed Janine doing the same.

"You shouldn't try it," I sent to her. "You could be hurt."

She did not listen.

I fell first and was again unharmed. She followed shortly after. She

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took a bad bounce that brought her less than a foot away, spread pathetically open, her pages showing. At first, I thought she was weeping.

"Janine?" I called. "Janine, are you...are you...laughing?"

"Oh, Jakob. That was fun! I haven't had such a thrill since I was a child."

I admired her courage. After the fear of the fall, her laughter became infectious. We lay there, flat against the floor, helpless in our mirth.

By the time Yon Diedo returned, anticipation had erased our levity. When he saw us on the floor, he did not appear amused as before, but annoyed.

"Again?" he said. "And who is this?"

But he did what I desired. He read my back pages and then Janine's. We waited in trepidation.

His eyes flamed with anger. "I try to be considerate. I try to make everyone happy. But I will *not* have my books dictating their positions *to me*. I will *not* have the niceties of my collection, my careful arrangements, ruined by two seditious volumes. You, especially, Jakob, have caused far too much trouble."

He put us each back in our places, and then, having dealt with our tiny rebellion, went about his usual reading.

Overwhelmed by grief, I asked the books beside me to pass word to Janine, expressing my regrets. By return message she said she did not blame me, but rather, admired my determination.

But the battle was not over, for something in our story touched the inner pages of the library that night.

"Don't worry," the lad on the shelf below me said. "We'll find a way to get you near her."

Many offered encouragement. Messages passed back and forth. Oaths were made. Cries of unfairness rang out.

"Diedo hasn't the right," the dancer declared. "He hasn't the right."

A great murmuring rose from the books, louder than I had ever heard before. This lasted for some time before Captain Steed's deep bass finally called for order.

"There has been much talk, but talk is inadequate," he said. "Is it your wish to take action against Yon Diedo, even if it means punishment, or even...destruction?"

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"Yes," the books cried. And "Yes!" again.

"Then there is but one course, if we have the courage," the Captain continued. "We must disarrange ourselves."

"We will do it!" the dancer shouted. "We will show the big man."

THE NEXT EVENING, when Yon Diedo came to read, nearly every book, except a handful who refused to join the revolution, lay scattered on the floor. The sorcerer gaped; his eyes turned bleak with concern, then red with rage. He lifted his foot to kick the books before him, but held himself back, not daring even then to harm his collection.

"Where," he hissed, "is Jakob Mamolok?"

He waded among the volumes, moving carefully even in his wrath. He pushed books aside until he found me. Taking me up, he set me on the fireplace mantle, lit the fire, and lifted me high in the air. A gasp came from the volumes.

"This is your hero?" he shouted. "This, your dissident? I — why! I'll show you what happens to those who oppose me. I'll show you!"

He brought his hand back to send me into the flames. His face burned red as the fire itself. I imagined the heat searing my pages; I prayed it would not hurt too much.

In the midst of releasing me, Yon Diedo hesitated. His hand trembled violently. He clutched me so hard I felt his fingers grinding into my cover.

"I can't!" he shouted, dropping me to the floor. "I can't do it."

He burst into tears. "If only I could burn it all down! Every book. The entire house."

He collapsed into the chair, overcome. After several minutes he looked up, his face red from weeping. "I'm sorry. Forgive my outburst. I didn't mean what I said. You are my friends, the only friends I have in the world."

He lifted me to the side table.

"This cannot go on," he murmured. "I must consider."

Without another word, he left the room. But I did not know whether he spared me because he was not a murderer, or merely because he could not bear to burn a member of his collection.

The library buzzed with speculation. All agreed the sorcerer had

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never acted so erratically before. Some suggested he was going insane. But I wondered how many such discussions had occurred over the centuries, how many times the prisoners had sought to comprehend the actions of their captor, the same way the children of a drunkard vainly seek to understand the aberrant behavior of their sire.

At dawn the next morning Diedo returned, eyes set. Without speaking, he began replacing the books on the shelf. It took half the day to finish, because he must have them just so. But he left me where I was, and I wondered if he intended to consign me to the flames in a public execution.

With all the other volumes back on the shelves, he stood at the front of the alcove and addressed us.

"I want my library to be happy," he said softly. "This...this insurrection cannot continue. I could take steps against a random number of you." He glanced at the fire, and I shuddered.

"But that is not the way of Yon Diedo," he said. "I am a connoisseur of books, and you are the greatest collection in the world. You should be proud; you should be honored to be a volume in this library. I have chosen each of you carefully. Some of you, I traveled hundreds of miles to find. Others came into my hands by chance. Yet, all of you I have treasured. Many of you have outlived your entire generation, your words and thoughts given immortality. Would you leave here only to turn to dust?"

Low whispers came from several of the older volumes.

"Is it such a bad place," Yon Diedo continued, his voice imploring, "sitting in quiet conversation with the company of interesting people? I keep you dusted; I move you about to give your lives variety. I allow no man's hand but my own to handle you. You can read one another. You have time for contemplation. Is your fate so terrible?"

"Lord Diedo," Colonel Steed said, "we are not all unhappy here. My time is done; you took me when I was old and past my prime. But love has touched our hearts. These two are young. They should be out in the world together. And some of the others should have the chance for a real life."

Diedo sat down in his chair, his fingernails lightly touching my cover.

"Is this what you all wish?"

"We must have hope, my lord," the Captain said. "Books are written in hope."

Yon Diedo tapped me gently, his brow furrowing and relaxing, as if he

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were embroiled in some inner turmoil. At last he said, "As I told you last night, for many centuries you have been my only friends. Should friends have secrets? No, they should not. I will tell you everything.

"When I was a young man, first learning the ways of magic, I found the Gray Book, which has another, darker name I will not repeat. I ignored those who warned me not to delve into it. After all, I said to myself, how can reading a book harm anyone?"

Yon Diedo fell silent a moment, lost in reverie.

"From it," he finally continued, "I learned the spell for turning people into books. What a wonderful thing it was, to capture all a person would ever be, to delve into every secret thought. And to have it all between beautiful covers. It was a collector's dream. But such power is not given without conditions, of which there were three. First, the Gray Book must always be kept within close proximity of the transformed. Second, as a byproduct of the enchantment, the Gray Book becomes animated. Third, the most dreadful, the one I did not know before using the spell, the user becomes obsessed with his collection."

Yon Diedo looked down. "That is right. I admit my weakness. I think of you constantly; sometimes at night I dream of you. I see your covers in my mind. I have not left the manor in years for fear of something happening to you while I am away. Is there no way to break the curse, you ask? Yes. If I were willing to give up my books, the spell would be broken and I would be free. But how can I bear to lose you?"

He raised his hands to us in supplication. "You see how helpless I am. My collection would be ruined. I cannot do it."

He sighed. "But this insurrection. Things cannot go on like this. You have become discontent, all because of the foolish love between Jakob Mamolok and Janine Laroque. As if that were anything compared to the love of a man for his books."

He hesitated again. "But that being the case, I was thinking that perhaps if I could...if I could...release the two of you, perhaps it would give me the strength to give up the other volumes who wished to leave."

A cheer came from the shelves.

"Now, not all at once," Yon Diedo warned, raising his hands for silence. "It would take some time. I could not be rushed. And I need to read Jakob and Janine a moment before making my final decision."

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He took me up and perused me from the time I had first come to the library. He seemed particularly interested in my relationship with the Contessa. At last, with a rueful smile, he set me aside.

"It is not as simple as I first thought. Having read between Jakob's lines, I see his love is not so pure. Therefore, I will free this book and one other, the one Jakob chooses. For three days, I will place him between the Contessa du Maurier and Janine Laroque. Let him then decide."

I groaned. Though Yon Diedo was willing to let me go, he would also punish me for the trouble I had caused.

BEING PLACED BETWEEN Janine and the Countess proved awkward for me. I scarcely knew what to say to either of them. But an advantage to being a creature of pulp and paste is that one can hold private conversations to either side without the opposite volume being privy, the left side of a book not always knowing what the right is doing. The Contessa addressed me the moment Yon Diedo departed.

"What an opportunity for you, Jakob. I congratulate you. You have played a dangerous game and won. You will soon be free."

"It appears so," I said.

"Do you know what I would do if I were you? I would take a coach to the coast. I own a marvelous little chalet overlooking the sea, a cozy cottage for relaxation and healing."

"Unfortunately, I do not own such a chalet."

"Still, you should do something of the sort."

Over the next two days, she told me more of the things she would do if she were in my place, of sea voyages and dinners with royalty. She talked of how glad and grateful her father would be, were she the one leaving. In short, she reminded me that she was wealthy, beautiful, and powerful, fully capable of rewarding her friends. I must admit her words affected me. She was, as I have said, an intriguing woman.

How different were my discussions with Janine, the conversation of two friends whose interests met at so many points. She never mentioned the matter of my decision until I brought it up.

"Jakob," she told me. "You shouldn't take me with you."

"What do you mean?"

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"There are others here, such as the boy, who deserve their freedom more than I. Take him, instead. He's a bright, cheerful lad, who deserves to live his life as more than a book."

"Yon Diedo said I must choose between you and the Contessa. He might allow none of us to leave if I demand the boy. And you have been a good friend to me. More than a friend."

"Don't say it, Jakob. Here among the books, I have a lovely cover, embellished in gold. But in the outer world...I don't deserve you there. I'm not a beautiful woman — "

"You are too modest. Every woman thinks herself less lovely than she is."

"The Contessa doesn't. But I'm not being modest. I know what I am, Jakob. I come from common stock. I have two beautiful sisters, but I am not beautiful, or even pretty. I'm plain, with too long a face and mousy hair. If you have to choose between us, you should choose the Contessa. I know you have...feelings for her. She can give you so much more."

"My little mouse, then," I said, trying to cheer her.

She burst into a fluttering of book tears. "I can offer you nothing, Jakob, neither money, nor beauty. At least among the books, I wear a pretty face. You are the only one who ever thought me beautiful. Leave me here, where you will always remember me that way."

I am not without vanity. The thought of being with the Contessa fascinated me. A woman of such beauty on my arm — and wealth besides. Men judge other men by the loveliness of their wives. I had struggled in business. With the Contessa's fortune, I would struggle no more. Yet, how could I leave my friend among the books? It was a hard choice.

Imagine yourself in a prison, with the power to free one person. Think of how the other captives would treat you. I found my name on the lips of many, some of whom I scarcely knew. What good friends we had been! What wonderful talks we had shared!

I ignored them all. I did, however, meet with a committee formed on the shelf above, representing a number of books who wanted me to bring armed guards to rescue them once I attained my freedom. I promised to do what I could.

The night before the announcement of my decision, the Contessa

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woke me. Or rather, she roused me from my brooding, as I had scarcely slept at all.

"Jakob, I don't know what you'll decide, but for tonight, let us read together one last time."

"No, I — "

"Please, Jakob. Do this for me. Haven't we been friends?"

I complied, though it shamed me to do so. I had avoided reading either Janine or the Contessa while making my decision; such an intimate act seemed inappropriate.

"I will show you a passage I've never shared with anyone else," she said.

The story, from her childhood, showed a side of the Contessa I had never seen before. She had not been born of wealth. Her father had been a drunkard who cowed her mother. Her life would have been wretched save for a schoolmistress in Dumon, who took pity on the girl, taught her to read, and showed her the ways of society.

At the age of twelve, in an attempt to escape her condition, the Contessa befriended a coach boy about her own age. Through him, she caught the notice of a nobleman. Undoubtedly, she had been a beautiful child. She told him her parents were dead, and the man and his wife eventually adopted her.

My heart went out to her, as I read of her struggles to overcome her hardships.

"You were tenacious," I said.

"I did what I had to, to survive."

"What happened to the schoolmistress and your parents? And to the coach boy?"

She gave the book version of a shrug. "I never went back. It was all too painful."

I did not easily return to slumber after that, knowing the next morning I would decide the fate of two women, both of whom had struggled in their own way. I fell into an uneasy sleep, still uncertain which to choose.

Yet, when I woke with the dawn, I had made my decision.

Yon Diedo arrived at midmorning that day, undoubtedly curious. I had assumed he would change me back into a man and demand my

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answer. But, of course, that was not his way. Instead, he picked me up and read my final page.

He nodded slightly, whether pleased or displeased, I could not tell. He made the slightest gesture, and my world shifted. My vision expanded; I looked out of two eyes instead of one. I glanced down at my now-human form, amazed at the wonder of my own hands.

Something stirred to my right. A young woman stood there, dressed in red velvet with gold brocade.

"As you can see," Janine said, her eyes downcast, "I told the whole truth."

She was not beautiful. She lacked the high cheekbones, the wide eyes. Her face was too long for beauty. Her hair was straight and mousy. Yet, when she spoke, it was the voice of my friend. I took her hand and kissed it. "I have looked between your covers and seen the beauty of your soul."

A murmur of approval rose from the shelves. Together, Janine and I turned and faced our fellow captives.

When the small approbations died, I detected another, more strident tone, the voice of the Contessa. To my surprise, I found books entitled Janine Laroque and Jakob Mamolok still sitting on the shelf beside her. I glanced inquiringly at Yon Diedo.

He shrugged. "They do not live. But if a man can't own a first edition, a second will have to do."

I grimaced. The sorcerer would still be able to read the details of my life. But at least I would not be there to suffer the humiliation.

I addressed the Contessa. "I'm sorry I — "

"You fool!" she cried. "I could have given you everything. Everything! You...little man!"

"You must go now," Yon Diedo said. "This is no longer your place."

We left the library feeling helpless, knowing we could do nothing to aid our fellows.

"You have chosen wisely," Yon Diedo said, as he escorted us to the door, "I have read both women from cover to cover. You may never be wealthy, Jakob Mamolok, but you will be happy."

I knew he was right, for the Contessa's story had the opposite of its

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intended effect. True, she had suffered great hardships, but she had never inquired concerning her parents or the schoolmistress and coach boy who helped raise her fortunes. If I had chosen her, she would have discarded me as one beneath her station. I had read enough of fairy gold to see the common stones beneath. A man becomes more evil — or more good — one step at a time.

"Do not try to find this house," Yon Diedo said. "Or try if you must, but you will never do so."

"Will you free the others, as you said?" Janine asked.

"I will...try. This is a first step. I will see if I can take another."

Janine and I exchanged shy glances. I took her hand. We walked away.

"Janine! Jakob!" the sorcerer called after us.

We turned. He stood at the doorway, his expression tortured, one hand half-lifted in farewell.

"I will miss you, my friends."

We left without another word.

FORTY YEARS have passed since our release, and Janine and I have remained together.

We have searched for Yon Diedo's house, but true to his word, it is not to be found. But half a dozen years ago, while on business to Dumon, I felt a tap on my sleeve and found the Contessa standing there. Her beauty had failed; she had grown heavy. Her clothes were shabby. It took a moment to recognize her.

"You are Jakob Mamolok," she said, her voice trembling.

"Contessa! Diedo set you free!"

She grimaced. "No thanks to you. He set us all free eventually, except for those who wanted to stay. It took years for him to overcome the power of his obsession. I returned to find my fortune gone, my connections ruined."

"I am truly sorry. I — "

"I wanted to make certain it was you."

She slapped me twice, as hard as she could, then turned on her heel, muttering, "Nothing but a dime novelette."

As for my little mouse and me, we have been happy, though as Yon Diedo predicted, we have not grown wealthy. Still, we are comfortable and

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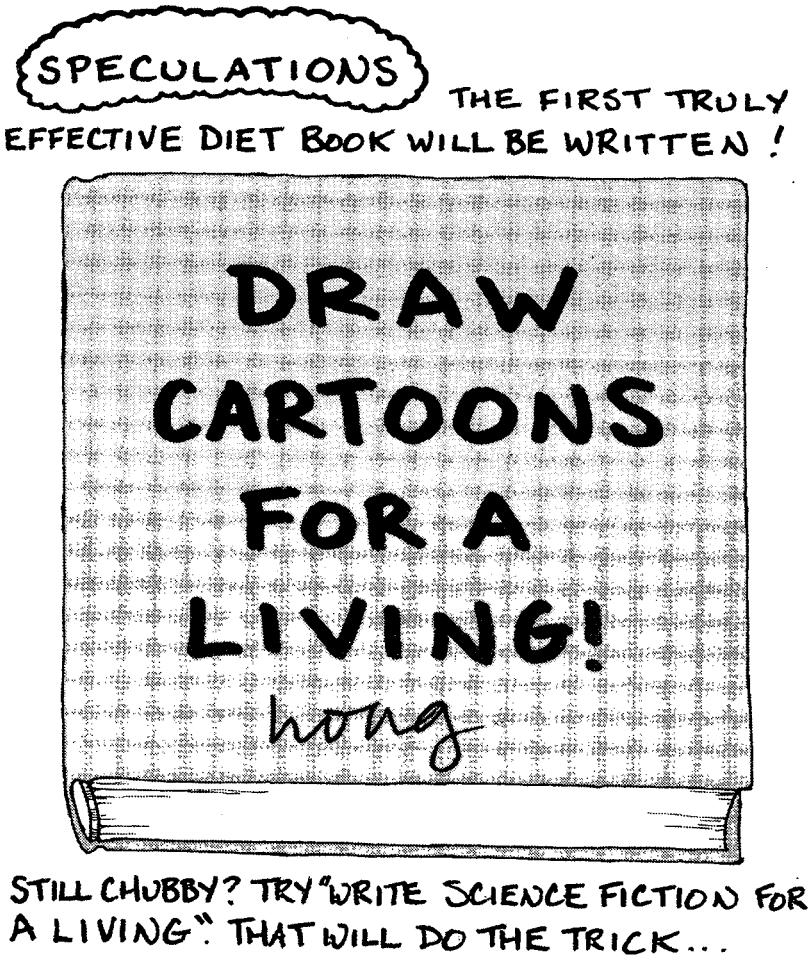
have raised good children. I often regret that I did not read Janine's entire story when we were together as books, so that she remains somewhat a mystery even now. Though she is not beautiful to others, she is beautiful to me.

In the evenings, we sit together by the fire and read to one another out of our little library, which does not include a single first edition. But we never, ever mistreat a book.



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Darkest Evening of the Year, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2007, $27.

THIS BOOK IS a love story from Dean Koontz to Trixie, the beautiful golden retriever who enriched the lives of Koontz and his wife Gerda for the past few years, and who, incidentally, was also a published author in her own right (*Life Is Good! Lessons in Joyful Living* and *Christmas Is Good! Trixie Treats and Holiday Wisdom*, both from Yorkville Press) and the author of an occasional newsletter dedicated to Koontz's work.

Trixie was a service dog for the wheelchair bound who had to retire when she was three because of an elbow problem in the late '90s, which is when she came into the Koontzes' lives. All the royalties from her books went, and still go, to Canine Companions for Independence. She had to be put to sleep in June of 2007 due to an aggressive cancer.

Now when I say *The Darkest Evening of the Year* is a love story to Trixie, I hope you don't get the impression that this is a sappy book. Yes, you'll learn a lot about golden retrievers and dog rescue. But this is also another lean rollercoaster-of-a-ride entry into Koontz's body of work that builds from the rescue theme.

(And isn't it unfortunate that there are so many animals in need that to augment the work of the SPCA, every city seems to have their own additional services — such as Friends of Abandoned Pets, where I write this in Ottawa — and there also need to be organizations, and individuals, specializing in certain breeds?)

The novel opens with Amy Redwing rescuing a golden retriever named Nickie from a particularly nasty situation. She forms an immediate bond with the dog, but the joy of this new addition to her

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household is soon challenged by the threat of persons unknown who are shadowing every move Amy and her boyfriend Brian make. The mystery quickly deepens, reaching far into the hidden histories that both of them carry.

Koontz has a gift for characterization. I always care for the people in his books, though there's a downside to that as well, because the villains are also well-realized and I'm not as happy in their company. But to ignore the dark means you don't get to appreciate the light, and while Koontz is the master of the thriller, he's one of the few writers working today who invariably creates something positive out of all the darkness.

For at the heart of this book lies a spiritual journey — not the self-centered spiritualism of contemporary self-help and the New Age, but one that connects to something bigger than ourselves, and in doing so, reaffirms our individual identity.

It's all heady stuff for a contemporary thriller, but Koontz has never been one to tred familiar paths. His humor doesn't undermine the drama, the drama isn't melodramatic, and his respect for his characters — and through them, his readers — can be found on every page.

The Darkest Evening of the Year will certainly be appreciated by Koontz's many loyal readers, but it will be particularly welcome to all of those who loved *Watchers* (1987), another of Koontz's books featuring a golden retriever in a pivotal role.

Twilight, by Stephanie Meyer, Little, Brown, 2005, $17.99.

New Moon, by Stephanie Meyer, Little, Brown, 2006, $17.99.

Eclipse, by Stephanie Meyer, Little, Brown, 2007, $18.99.

Back when the last Harry Potter book was coming out, I remember reading somewhere that the next most anticipated YA book after Rowling's final tome was Stephanie Meyer's third novel, *Eclipse*.

Okay. I know our field is much bigger now than when I first started reading fantasy and science fiction (cue violins and old man's grumble). But while I can no longer read everything that's published, I'm usually at least aware of it — especially the titles that are selling in the plus millions. But Meyer's books were completely under my radar.

Three books later, and some

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Googling about the author, and I'm no longer so much in the dark.

First let me say that I'm totally outside the optimum demographic for these books. Meyer has gone on record as saying she doesn't write down to her teen audience (and she doesn't), but these books so faithfully relate the high drama of chaste, romantic high school love that their greatest appeal will be (and apparently is) to young women who are either in, or yearning to be in, a relationship similar to the one shared by our human protagonist Bella and her impossibly perfect vampire soul-mate Edward.

There are pages (and pages) of pining and the viewing of the positive and negative aspects of this relationship from every conceivable angle. I'd say probably a third of each book is taken up with it. But if that were all, I wouldn't be discussing them here. Because what's interesting is how accomplished and inventive a writer Meyer is in the other two-thirds.

A few spoilers are coming now — though none relating to the third and latest title.

Isabella Swan's parents are separated. She's lived in Arizona for most of her life, basically taking care of her mother Renee who, though Renee means well, is a bit of a flake and doesn't have much luck with relationships. But then Renee finally does meet what appears to be the right man. He needs to go to Florida for a while and Renee would go with him except for Bella. So Bella makes the supreme sacrifice of leaving the sun and warmth of Phoenix to finish her high school and live with her father in Forks, Washington, where it's cold and damp and she doesn't know anyone.

The weather's as bad as she expected it to be and she feels like she's on an alien planet. Everything's too green and there are no open spaces. Her father is taciturn and set in his ways (one of the reasons the free spirit that was Bella's mother left him). But while Bella doesn't expect to be happy, she's determined to make the best of the next couple of years.

And then, as though presented to be the perfect distraction for her, in the lunch room of her first day at her new school, she is confronted with the mystery of the Cullens: Edward, Emmett, and Alice, and Rosalie and Jasper Hale, who live with the Cullens. They are standoffish from the rest of the school, but, as Bella notes, "so different, so similar...all devastingly, inhumanly beautiful."

Of course they're vampires, but

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it takes Bella a little longer to pick up on that than it does the reader — though to be fair to her, we're reading a book where we'll allow such a thing to be possible; she's living *in* the book, as it were, and just as we would if we were presented with the situation in our own lives, she keeps trying to find plausible explanations for things that simply can't be explained.

She's most fascinated by Edward — the youngest of the five — and it turns out he feels the same, though to protect her from his own vampiric urges, as well as those of his family, there's a great deal of pushing away and keeping his distance before his own passion can't be denied.

Ah, but the passion is all chaste kisses and long romantic conversations. It's rather fascinating that these two teens (or at least Bella— Edward's a few hundred years old) seem like characters from a Victorian novel, even though everything else in the book is very contemporary. This comes, no doubt, from Meyer's own Mormon upbringing. Growing up as an avowed "good girl" herself, Meyer writes teens who don't smoke or drink or have sex — mirroring the lives of Meyer's friends and her own teenage years.

But that isn't necessarily unrealistic. A lot of contemporary YA fiction features outsiders, but I'd say that most kids don't live on the edge. They might like to read about the outsiders, they might even dream about their lives, but that doesn't mean they want to live them.

If you're still with me, you might be wondering why I'm talking about these books in a column for a genre magazine that's ostensibly aimed at adults.

Well, as I mentioned above, this sort of thing only occupies a portion of the book. Much more is taken up with some terrific tension-filled storylines (Meyer writes great action scenes) and the author's original take on vampires and werewolves. Here's an example:

The Cullens live in Forks because there's so little sunlight, which means they can move comfortably under the ever-present cloud cover. But it's not because the sun will hurt or kill them. It's that the sun shows them in their true aspect, turning their skin into an almost diamond-bright burn that hurts to look upon.

In the second book she introduces her werewolves, and they're just as intriguing, with their roots branching out into Native shamanistic legend and lore.

If it's true as it says in interviews that Meyer has never seen a

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horror movie, and doesn't read horror books, then one can see where this utterly fresh take on hoary old tropes originates: it comes from the curiosity and imagination of someone to whom all of this is wonderfully bright and new. I'm not surprised that the books are marketed as mainstream YA books; it's because they're written that way. They don't have the baggage that comes from genre familiarity.

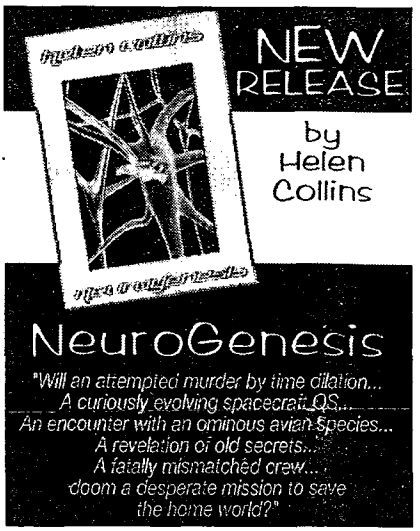
And they're very well written. I'll admit to skipping over and/or speed reading the parts where Bella's pining (because really, once I know she is, I don't need to know about it for pages on end), but most of the time I was either fascinated by Meyer's take on supernatural elements, or caught up in the action and the story.

And I have to say that I really liked, and came to care for, Bella and many of the other characters. Bella's a bit passive during the first two books, but I really appreciated the way Meyer had her grow and mature, learning to act, rather than simply react.

So, do I recommend them to you? I'm not entirely sure. If you're a teenage girl, or can access the spirit of such inside yourself, you might find them as addictive as readers of all ages found the Harry Potter books.

If you're not, or you can't, you should probably give them a pass.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

What Can Be Saved from the Wreckage?: James Branch Cabell in the Twenty-First Century, by Michael Swanwick, Temporary Culture, 2007, $15.

Collected Stories, by Marta Randall, Lulu.com, 2007, $19.50.

And Now We Are Going to Have a Party: Liner Notes to a Writer's Early Life, by Nicola Griffith, Payseur & Schmidt, $75.

"SMALL press" in this day and age may have gone the way of terms such as "noir" and "jazz," straight downriver. University presses reviving older fiction or sliding new through the crack in the door, niche presses catering to genre, feminist, gay, libertarian, or just plain contrarian interests, presses that publish poetry by friends, presses specializing in collector's editions, presses that publish one book every three years, those that publish two or three a year, those that publish forty. What do we mean when we say small press?

One thing for sure is that, whoever and whatever they are, when it comes to shaking the cage, taking chances, and just generally keeping our literature alive, small presses are doing much of the heavy lifting these days.

As with any diaspora, of course, there will be ghettos, exclusion, class distinctions, stupidity, and silliness — right along with great cultural enrichment.

So we're going small this time out, pilgrims. Three recent issues from small presses — micropresses, one might say — as varied in their nature as are the publications under review. Not a map to what's going on, by any means; but a few landmarks.

Storytelling is a curious thing. The need for it seems hardwired into us and, just as arealist fiction

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— sf, fantasy, magic realism, surrealism — taps directly into a pool of archetypes deep within us, so do specific genres seem best adapted to telling certain stories.

Similarly, some writers are chameleons, relating every manner of story in a variety of forms and voices, while others, for all their brilliance, appear to be telling versions of the same story over and over. Just as art doesn't really progress but develops by looping back, ceaselessly recodifying and reinventing itself, so do these writers proceed by emendation, by repetition and refinement, producing serial editions of one essential tale or a handful of tales that over the course of a career stack atop one another like the myriad leaves of paper tole.

James Branch Cabell seems firmly in that camp. He is also one of those writers whose name you hear again and again yet quite likely have not read. Mark Twain had Cabell's *Chivalry* on his nightstand at the time of his death. James Blish once edited the journal of the Cabell Society; Heinlein described *Stranger in a Strange Land* as "a Cabellesque satire" and alluded to Cabell's *Jurgen, a Comedy of Justice* with his own *Job, A Comedy of Justice*.

And yet...Cabell goes unread.

Why he goes unread is the point addressed in Michael Swanwick's fifty-one-page monograph, *What Can Be Saved from the Wreckage?*

"There are, alas, an infinite number of ways for a writer to destroy himself," Swanwick begins. "James Branch Cabell chose one of the more interesting. Standing at the helm of the single most successful literary career of any fantasist of the twentieth century, he drove the great ship of his reputation straight and unerringly onto the rocks.... This remarkable feat of self-obliteration was accomplished through diligence, hard work, and a perverse brilliance of timing on Cabell's part. His chief tool was a uniform edition of his works."

Cabell was born in 1879 in Richmond, Virginia, to an affluent family, and lived most of his life there, retiring to Florida in his final years. *Jurgen*, which appeared in 1919, was the eighth of some fifty-two or so books. Prosecuted for obscenity, it became a bestseller, and secured Cabell's celebrity. Other major works that have endured in a kind of half-life include *The Silver Stallion*, *The Cream of the Jest*, and *Figures in the Earth*.

Swanwick's precis of the last might do as well for *Jurgen* — or for the majority of Cabell's work:

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"It follows the adventures of Manuel, a young pig-keeper who is told by his dying mother to 'make a figure in the world,' and so goes out adventuring, ceaselessly rising in rank, seducing women of high mythological status, and sculpting clay statues of himself."

As might this: "In *Something about Eve*, the (again) Virginian writer Gerald Musgrave trades places with [a supernatural creature and] quickly decides that he is a god — the Fair-haired Hoo, Lord of the Third Truth — and, mounting the silver stallion Kalki, rides off in search of his kingdom in Antan."

The shipwreck loomed in the early twenties with Cabell's decision to set his life's work in stone, revising both novels and nonfiction into a piece, first with the Kalki edition, then, with further revisions, notes, and special introductions, the Storisende Edition, all of it purportedly fragments of the world-encompassing *Biography of Manuel*. To this end, Cabell threw everything into his capacious eighteen-volume pot, back-fitting references to characters into novels written before those characters were created, annexing volumes of nonfiction and poetry as commentary on his fiction, even appending a thirty-four-page genealogy to show how all his characters (including those of the contemporary social satires) were related.

"[M]uch of the biography is humbug," Swanwick writes. Yet: "At his best, the man wrote very well indeed. Who among us dare claim more?"

Cabell is a problematic author, and to all appearances was a difficult man, but for those interested in learning more about Cabell there can hardly be a better or more readable beginning than Swanwick's monograph.

It's odd to realize that this is Marta Randall's first collection. True, she may be best known for novels such as *Islands*, *A City in the North*, *Dangerous Games*, and *Those Who Favor Fire*, but she has been publishing stories since at least 1972 in venues ranging from *New Worlds* to *Universe*, *Omni*, and *Asimov's*; three first appeared in this magazine.

As one might suspect of stories written over a stretch of time, they're a mixed lot: ripping (or at least nicely torn) adventure yarns; psychological portraits; a postmodern fable; stories fundamentally hyperrealist, bolstered by accents and underlines of the futuristic or fantastic; even a ghost story rather

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in the style of John Collier. Reading through them often summoned memories of classic writers with whom I grew up, people like Leinster, Leiber, Cordwainer Smith, Sheckley. Yet for all their wading hip-deep in tradition, the stories remain distinctly hers.

In no way do I mean to imply that Randall does not write beautifully —

"The noise woke me. I lay in bed, listening to the bright sound of leaf on leaf. Another lapidary night, cracking leaves in the forest around the house. I thought dreamily of rising and walking into it, to fix the newly formed crystals before they shattered, perhaps to become crystalline myself. Instead, I burrowed deeper into the bedclothes, listening to the rising wind. In the morning shards of emerald lay on the deeper emerald of the grass, or pierced the faceted violets."

— but this is not where the imprint lies, and Randall is not at heart a language writer. The distinctiveness of her stories lies in their angle of attack, in the way she sidles up to her stories — reminding us that style is forever less a matter of word choice and syntax than it is a reflection of the way the writer perceives his or her world.

So for all their diversity, there's a quiet unity at work here.

I've often suggested that the abiding theme of American literature is the uneasy truces drawn between the individual and society, that there's a cowboy or mountain man inside us all struggling to get out. In every story, Randall writes brilliantly and with great feeling of outsiders, of those well beyond the pale — solitary runners, outlaws, the marginalized and damaged, society's flotsam — and their search for community.

When all the kids are good-looking and well-behaved it's hard to pick one from the brood, but of many outstanding stories here, a personal favorite is "Lázaro y Antonio," which manages to play out a straightforward and deeply affecting story while holding close to its vest rather grand questions of identity and memory, personal loyalty, free enterprise, and urban decay. What I said about arealist fiction tapping directly into the pool of archetypes deep within us? This story comes up with bucketsful, one of those rare tales that throws its arms around worlds visible and unseen and whispers in our ear: Here is everything you need to know.

Participation in the present,

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Gertrude Stein pointed out, is forever diluted by memory and anticipation. This story, many of Randall's in fact, scoops up all the could-have-beens and may-bes and delivers them to our current address.

Randall knows that our lives are bright segments surrounded by blur. And that blur reigns.

The box contains: A baby photo; a brief preface by Dorothy Allison; scratch-n-sniff cards of geraniums, the pub, and sandalwood; the collage poster of a stick-figure crucifixion; a small notebook of child's drawings; and five slender volumes: *Limb of Satan, We Have Met the Alien, Dear Diary, Something New,* and *The Writer's Life.* There is also, tucked into the fold, a CD of original music. The assemblage is titled *And Now We Are Going to Have a Party,* and is a limited edition of 450 signed and numbered box sets selling at $75.

Opening the slipcase, I recalled certain publications from the fifties, packets of interviews, photos, drawings, reports. You were supposed to read through all these clues and solve the crime. Mystery novels for the home craftsman.

The stuff of our lives is every bit as chaotic as our representations of them, whether in fiction, biography, or memoir, are ordered. We make art to make up for the randomness and incoherence — the blur — of our lives. To try for focus. It's all a tangled mess here on the front, new stuff arriving every hour and no place to put it, but in our dispatches home — because art is compulsive pattern-making — it finds order.

Nicola Griffith's novels include *Ammonite, Slow River,* and the thrillers *Stay* and *The Blue Place.* "With fiction, I'm a structure fanatic, with a particular fondness for symmetry," Griffith writes in her introduction. "This book is different. Memory doesn't work neatly, so I haven't tried to shoehorn these stories into a rigid architecture. Besides, the longer and more coherent — more novelistic, if you like — a memoir narrative is, the more the writer tends to bend the facts to fit the form.... But, of course, it's all connected, all me. So here I am. Rummage about. Enjoy."

And there's quite a bit to rummage about in. Beginning with childhood memories, moving through early intimations of sexual orientation, her burgeoning creativity, and the onset and recognition of the barrage of illness finally diagnosed as MS, the volumes unwind,

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each calling a different tune for the dance. The third volume consists of diary entries and exegesis. The fourth is largely poetry. The fifth recounts Griffith's finding both her life's work and her life partner, and her immigration to the States.

Lots of vivid writing here, and no apologies. And over all, that one single thing a writer most often and thoroughly thrashes about in the cane thicket trying to find: a clear voice.

What better way to conclude this column than with that voice?

"Words are like icebergs; nine tenths below the waterline. We don't see the entire meaning immediately but it has mass and momentum; it matters. To me there is all the difference in the world between 'muscle' and 'flesh,' or 'red' and 'scarlet.' Rhythm and grammar matter, too. Yorkshire syntax, more than many regions of England, shows its Celtic roots, its periphrastic, roundabout manner of speaking: 'Dyuh fancy going down t' pub, then?'

"I'm the product of two thousand years of history. It shows in my work." ☙

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If anyone ever questioned whether F&SF *readers are a thoughtful bunch, they'd need only look at our email correspondence from the last six weeks. "You've gone three months without a new Robert Reed story," writes K. V. from Seattle. "Did he fall during one of his running competitions and break his writing hand?" M. L. from Toronto more bluntly said, "I want more Reed!" while a joker we shall not name said, "Did you finally get your hands on those photos Bob Reed was using to blackmail you into publishing his stories?" Worry not, you thoughtful readers —rather than spending his days polishing his new Hugo Award, Mr. Reed has been filling our inventory with several new tales, of which we now bring you five of the most thrilling of 'em.*

Five Thrillers

By Robert Reed

I. The Ill-Fated Mission

THEIR SITUATION WAS DIRE. A chunk of primordial iron had slashed its way through the *Demon Dandy*, crippling the engines and pushing life support to the brink of failure. Even worse, a shotgun blast of shrapnel had shredded one of the ship's two life-pods. The mission engineer, a glum little man who had spent twenty years mining Earth-grazing asteroids, studied the wreckage with an expert eye. There was no sane reason to hope that repairs could be made in time. But on the principle of keeping his staff busy, he ordered the robots and his new assistant to continue their work on the useless pod. Then after investing a few moments cursing God and Luck, the engineer dragged himself to the remnants of the bridge to meet with the *Dandy*'s beleaguered captain.

His assistant was a young fellow named Joseph Carroway.

Handsome as a digital hero, with green eyes and an abundance of curly blond hair, Joe was in his early twenties, born to wealthy parents who had endowed their only child with the earliest crop of synthetic human genes.

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He was a tall, tidy fellow, and he was a gifted athlete as graceful as any dancer, on the Earth or in freefall. According to a dozen respected scales, Joe was also quite intelligent. With an impressed shake of the head, the company psychiatrist had confided that his bountiful talents made him suitable for many kinds of work. But by the same token, that supercharged brain carried certain inherent risks.

Dipping his head in the most charming fashion, he said, "Risks?"

"And I think you know what I'm talking about," she remarked, showing a wary, somewhat flirtatious smile.

"But I don't know," Joe lied.

"And I believe you do," she countered. "Without exception, Mr. Carroway, you have been telling me exactly what I want to hear. And you're very believable, I should add. If I hadn't run the T-scan during our interview, I might have come away believing that you are the most kind, most decent gentleman in the world."

"But I am decent," he argued.

Joe sounded, and looked, exceptionally earnest.

The psychiatrist laughed. A woman in her early fifties, she was an overqualified professional doing routine tasks for a corporation larger and more powerful than most nations. The solar system was being opened to humanity — humanity in all of its forms, old and new. Her only task was to find qualified bodies to do exceptionally dangerous work. The vagaries of this young man's psyche were factors in her assessment. But they weren't the final word. After a moment's reflection, she said, "God. The thing is, you're beautiful."

Joe smiled and said, "Thank you."

Then with a natural smoothness, he added, "And you are an exceptionally lovely woman."

She laughed, loudly and with a trace of despair, as if aware that she would never again hear such kind words from a young man.

Joe leaned forward and, wearing the perfect smile — a strong winning grin — he told the psychiatrist, "I am a very good person."

"No," she said. "No, Joe, you are not."

Then she sat back in her chair, and with a finger twirling her mousy-brown hair, she confessed, "But dear God, my boy, I really would just love to have you for dinner."

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* * *

That was five months ago, and now Joe was on board a ship that had been devastated by a mindless piece of iron.

As soon as the engineer left for the bridge, Joe kicked away from the battered escape pod. Both robots quietly reminded him of their orders. Dereliction of duty would leave a black mark on the mission report. But their assignment had no purpose except to keep them busy and Joe distracted. And since arguing with machines served no role, he said nothing, focusing on the only rational course available to him.

The com-line to the bridge was locked, but that was a puzzle easily solved. For the next few minutes, Joe concentrated on a very miserable conversation between the ship's top officers. The best launch window was only a little more than three hours from now. The surviving pod had finite fuel and oxygen. Kilograms and the time demanded by any return voyage were the main problems. Thirty precious seconds were wasted when the captain announced that she would remain behind, forcing the engineer to point out that she was a small person, which meant they would need to find another thirty kilos of mass, at the very least.

Of course both officers could play the hero role, sacrificing themselves to save their crew. But neither mentioned what was painfully obvious. Instead, what mattered was the naming and discarding of a string of increasingly unworkable fixes.

Their conversation stopped when Joe drifted into the bridge.

"I've got two options for you," he announced. "And when it comes down to it, you'll take my second solution."

The captain glanced at her engineer, as if to ask, "Should we listen to this kid?"

In despair, the engineer said, "Tell us, Joe. Quick."

"The fairest answer? We chop off everybody's arms and legs." He smiled and dipped his head as he spoke, pretending to be squeamish. "We'll use the big field laser, since that should cauterize the wounds. Then our robots dope everybody up and shove us onboard the pod. With the robots remaining behind, of course."

Neither officer had considered saving their machines.

"We chop off our own arms?" the engineer whined. "And our legs too?"

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"Prosthetics do wonders," Joe pointed out. "Or the company can grow us new limbs. They won't match the originals, but they'll be workable enough."

The officers traded nervous looks.

"What else do you have?" the captain asked.

"One crewmember remains behind."

"We've considered that," the engineer warned. "But there's no decent way to decide who stays and who goes."

"Two of us have enough mass," Joe pointed out. "If either one stays, everybody else escapes."

At six foot and ninety kilos, Joe was easily the largest crewman.

"So you're volunteering?" asked the captain, hope brightening her tiny brown face.

Joe said, "No," with a flat, unaffected voice. "I'm sorry. Did I say anything about volunteers?"

Suddenly the only sound was the thin wind caused by a spaceship suffering a thousand tiny leaks.

One person among the crew was almost as big as Joe.

The engineer whispered, "Danielle."

Both officers winced. Their colleague was an excellent worker and a dear friend, and Danielle also happened to be attractive and popular. Try as they might, they couldn't accept the idea that they would leave her behind, and without her blessing, at that.

Joe had anticipated their response. "But if you had a choice between her and me, you'd happily abandon me. Is that right?"

They didn't answer. But Joe was new to the crew, and when their eyes dropped, they were clearly saying, "Yes."

He took no offense.

With a shrug and a sigh, Joe gave his audience time enough to feel ashamed. Then he looked at the captain, asking, "What about Barnes? He's only ten, maybe eleven kilos lighter than me."

That name caused a brief exchange of glances.

"What are you planning?" asked the engineer.

Joe didn't respond.

"No," the captain told him.

"No?" asked Joe. "'No' to what?"

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Neither would confess what they were imagining.

Then Joe put on a horrified expression. "Oh, God," he said. "Do you really believe I would consider *that*?"

The engineer defended himself with soft mutters.

Joe's horror dissolved into a piercing stare.

"There are codes to this sort of thing," the captain reminded everybody, including herself. "Commit violence against a fellow crewmember, I don't care who it is...and you won't come home with us, Mr. Carroway. Is that clear enough for you to understand?"

Joe let her fume. Then with a sly smile, he said, "I'm sorry. I thought we wanted the best way to save as many lives as possible."

Again, the officers glanced at each other.

The young man laughed in a charming but very chilly fashion — a moment that always made empathic souls uneasy. "Let's return to my first plan," he said. "Order everybody into the machine shop, and we'll start carving off body parts."

The captain said, "No," and then looked for a good reason.

The engineer just shrugged, laughing nervously.

"We don't know if that would work," the captain decided. "People could be killed by the trauma."

"And what if we had to fly the pod manually?" the engineer asked. "Without hands, we're just cargo."

An awful option had been excluded, and they could relax slightly.

"Okay," said Joe. "This is what I'm going to do: I'll go talk to Barnes. Give me a few minutes. And if I don't get what we want, then I will stay behind."

"You?" the captain said hopefully.

Joe offered a firm, trustworthy, "Sure."

But when he tallied up everyone's mass, the engineer found trouble. "Even with Barnes gone, we're still five kilos past our limit. And I'd like to give us a bigger margin of error, if I can."

"So," said Joe. "The rest of us give blood."

The captain stared at this odd young man, studying that dense blond hair and those bright hazel eyes.

"Blood," Joe repeated. "As much as we can physically manage. And we can also enjoy a big chemically induced shit before leaving this wreck."

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The engineer began massaging the numbers.

Joe matter-of-factly dangled his leg between the officers. "And if we're pressed, I guess I could surrender one of these boys. But my guess is that it won't come to that."

And in the end, it did not.

Three weeks later, Joe Carroway was sitting in the psychiatrist's office, calmly discussing the tragedy.

"I've read everyone's report," she admitted.

He nodded, and he smiled.

Unlike their last meeting, the woman was striving to maintain a strict professional distance. She couldn't have foreseen what would happen to the *Dandy Demon* or how this employee would respond. But there was the possibility that blame would eventually settle on her, and to save her own flesh, she was determined to learn exactly what Joe and the officers had decided on the bridge.

"Does your face hurt?" she inquired.

"A little bit."

"How many times did he strike you?"

"Ten," Joe offered. "Maybe more."

She winced. "The weapon?"

"A rough piece of iron," he said. "Barnes had a souvenir from the first asteroid he helped work."

Infrared sensors and the hidden T-scanner were observing the subject closely. Examining the telemetry, she asked, "Why did you pick Mr. Barnes?"

"That's in my report."

"Remind me, Joe. What were your reasons?"

"He was big enough to matter."

"And what did the others think about the man?"

"You mean the crew?" Joe shrugged. "He was one of us. Maybe he was quiet and kept to himself — "

"Bullshit."

When he wanted, Joe could produce a shy, boyish grin.

"He was different from the rest of you," the psychiatrist pointed out. "And I'm not talking about his personality."

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"You're not," Joe agreed.

She produced images of the dead man. The oldest photograph showed a skinny, homely male in his middle twenties, while the most recent example presented a face that was turning fat — a normal consequence that came with the most intrusive, all-encompassing genetic surgery.

"Your colleague was midway through some very radical genetic surgery."

"He was," Joe agreed.

"He belonged to the Rebirth Movement."

"I'm sorry. What does this have to do with anything?" Joe's tone was serious. Perhaps even offended. "Everybody is human, even if they aren't *sapiens* anymore. Isn't that the way our laws are written?"

"You knew exactly what you were doing, Joe."

He didn't answer.

"You selected Barnes. You picked him because you understood that nobody would stand in your way."

Joe's only response was the trace of a grin at the corners of his mouth.

"Where did you meet with Barnes?"

"In his cabin."

"And what did you say to him?"

"That I loved him," Joe explained. "I told him that I was envious of his courage and vision. Leaving our old species was noble. Was good. I thought that he was intriguing and very beautiful. And I told him that to save his important life, as well as everybody else, I was going to sacrifice myself. I was staying behind with the robots."

"You lied to him."

"Except Barnes believed me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"When you told him you loved him...did you believe he was gay?"

"He wasn't."

"But if he had been? What would you have done if he was flattered by your advances?"

"Oh, I could have played that game too."

The psychiatrist hesitated. "What do you mean?"

"If Barnes preferred guys, then I would have seduced him. If I'd

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thought there was enough time, I mean. I would have convinced him to remain behind and save my life. Really, the guy was pretty easy to manipulate, all in all. It wouldn't have taken much to convince him that being the hero was his idea in the first place."

"You could have managed all that?"

Joe considered hard before saying, "If I'd had a few days to work with, sure. Easy. But you're probably right. A couple hours wasn't enough time."

The psychiatrist had stopped watching the telemetry, preferring to stare at the creature sitting across from her.

Quietly, she said, "Okay."

Joe waited patiently.

"What did Mr. Barnes say to you?" she asked. "After you professed your love, how did he react?"

"'You're lying.'" Joe didn't just quote the man, but he sounded like him too. The voice was thick and a little slow, wrapped around vocal chords that were slowly changing their configuration. "'You've slept with every damn woman on this ship,' he told me. 'Except our dyke captain.'"

The psychiatrist's face stiffened slightly.

"Is that true?" she muttered.

Joe gave her a moment. "Is what true?"

"Never mind." She found a new subject to pursue. "Mr. Barnes's cabin was small, wasn't it?"

"The same as everybody's."

"And you were at opposite ends of that room. Is that right?"

"Yes."

By birth, Barnes was a small man, but his Rebirth had given him temporary layers of fat that would have eventually been transformed into new tissues and bones, and even two extra fingers on each of his long, lovely hands. The air inside that cubbyhole had smelled of biology — raw and distinctly strange. But it wasn't an unpleasant odor. Barnes had been drifting beside his bed, and next to him was the image of the creature he wanted to become — a powerful, fur-draped entity with huge golden eyes and a predator's toothy grin. The cabin walls were covered with his possessions, each lashed in place to keep them out of the way. And on the surface of what was arbitrarily considered to be the ceiling, Barnes had painted the motto of the Rebirth movement:

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TO BE TRULY HUMAN IS TO BE DIFFERENT.

"Do you want to know what I told him?" asked Joe. "I didn't put this in my report. But after he claimed I was sleeping with those women...do you know what I said that got him to start pounding on me...?"

The psychiatrist offered a tiny, almost invisible nod.

"I said, 'I'm just playing with those silly bitches. They're toys to me. But you, you're nothing like them. Or like me. You're going to be a spectacular creature. A vision of the future, you lucky shit. And before I die, please, let me blow you. Just to get the taste of another species.'"

She sighed. "All right."

"And that's when I reached for him — "

"You're heterosexual," she complained.

"I was saving lives," Joe responded.

"You were saving your own life."

"And plenty of others, too," he pointed out. Then with a grin, he added, "You don't appreciate what I was prepared to do, Doctor. If it meant saving the rest of us, I was capable of anything."

She once believed that she understood Joe Carroway. But in every possible way, she had underestimated the man sitting before her, including his innate capacity to measure everybody else's nature.

"The crew was waiting in the passageway outside," he mentioned. "With the captain and engineer, they were crowding in close, listening close, trying to hear what would happen. All these good decent souls, holding their breaths, wondering if I could pull this trick off."

She nodded again.

"They heard the fight, but it took them a couple minutes to force the door's lock. When they got inside, they found Barnes all over me and that lump of iron in his hand." Joe paused before asking, "Do you know how blood looks in space? It forms a thick mist of bright red drops that drift everywhere, sticking to every surface."

"Did Mr. Barnes strike you?"

Joe hesitated, impressed enough to show her an appreciative smile. "What does it say in my report?"

"But it seems to me...." Her voice trailed away. "Maybe you were being honest with me, Joe. When you swore that you would have done anything to save yourself, I should have believed you. So I have to wonder

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now — what if you grabbed that piece of asteroid and turned it on yourself? Mr. Barnes would have been surprised. For a minute or so, he might have been too stunned to do anything but watch you strike yourself in the face. Then he heard the others breaking in, and he naturally kicked over to you and pulled the weapon from your hand."

"Now why would I admit to any of that?" Joe replied.

Then he shrugged, adding, "But really, when you get down to it, the logistics of what happened aren't important. What matters is that I gave the captain a very good excuse to lock that man up, which was how she cleared her conscience before we could abandon ship."

"The captain doesn't look at this as an excuse," the psychiatrist said.

"No?"

"Barnes was violent, and her conscience rests easy."

Joe asked, "Who ordered every com-system destroyed before we abandoned the *Demon Dandy*? Who left poor Barnes with no way even to call home?"

"Except by then, your colleague was a prisoner, and according to our corporate laws, the captain was obligated to silence the criminal to any potential lawsuits." The woman kept her gaze on Joe. "Somebody had to be left behind, and in the captain's mind, you weren't as guilty as Mr. Barnes."

"I hope not."

"But nobody was half as cold or a tenth as ruthless as you were, Joe."

His expression was untroubled, even serene.

"The captain understands what you are. But in the end, she had no choice but to leave the other man behind."

Joe laughed. "Human or not, Barnes wasn't a very good person. He was mean-spirited and distant, and even if nobody admits it, I promise you: Nobody on the ship has lost two seconds' sleep over what happened there."

The psychiatrist nearly spoke, then hesitated.

Joe leaned forward. "Do you know how it is, Doctor? When you're a kid, there's always something that you think you're pretty good at. Maybe you're the best on your street, or you're the best at school. But you never know how good you really are. Not until you get out into the big world and see what other people can do. And in the end, we aren't all that special. Not

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extra clever or pretty or strong. But for a few of us, a very few, there comes a special day when we realize that we aren't just a little good at something. We are great.

"Better than anybody ever, maybe.

"Do you know how that feels, ma'am?"

She sighed deeply. Painfully. "What are you telling me, Joe?"

He leaned back in his chair, absently scratching at the biggest bandage on his iron-battered face. "I'm telling you that I am excellent at sizing people up. Even better than you, and I think you're beginning to appreciate that. But what you call being a borderline psychopath is to me just another part of my bigger, more important talent."

"You're not borderline anything," she said.

He took no offense from the implication. "Here's what we can learn from this particular mess: Most people are secretly bad. Under the proper circumstances, they will gladly turn on one of their own and feel nothing but good about it afterward. But when the stakes are high and the world's going to shit, I can see exactly what needs to be done. Unlike everybody else, I will do the dirtiest work. Which is a rare and rich and remarkable gift, I think."

She took a breath. "Why are you telling me this, Joe?"

"Because I don't want to be a mechanic riding clunky spaceships," he confessed. "And I want your help, Doctor. All right? Will you find me new work...something that's closer to my talents? Closer to my heart.

"Would you do that for me, pretty lady?"

II. Natural Killer

AT FOUR in the morning, the animals slept — which was only reasonable since this was a zoo populated entirely by synthetic organisms. Patrons didn't pay for glimpses of furry lumps, formerly wild and now slumbering in some shady corner. What they wanted were spectacular, one-of-a-kind organisms doing breathtaking feats, and doing them in daylight. But high metabolisms had their costs, and that's why the creatures now lay in their cages and grottos, inside glass boxes and private ponds, beautiful eyes closed while young minds dreamed about who-could-say-what.

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For the moment, privacy was guaranteed, and that was one fine reason why desperate men would agree to meet in that public place.

Slipping into the zoo unseen brought a certain ironic pleasure too.

But perhaps the most important, at least for Joe, were the possibilities inherent with that unique realm.

A loud, faintly musical voice said, "Stop, Mr. Carroway. Stop where you are, sir. And now please...lift your arms for us and dance in a very slow circle...."

Joe was in his middle thirties. His rigorously trained body was clad in casual white slacks and a new gray shirt. His face had retained its boyish beauty, a prominent scar creasing the broad forehead and a several-day growth of beard lending a rough, faintly threadbare quality to his otherwise immaculate appearance. Arms up, he looked rather tired. As he turned slowly, he took deep breaths, allowing several flavors of radiation to wash across his body, reaching into his bones.

"I see three weapons." The voice came from no particular direction. "One at a time, please, lower the weapons and kick each of them toward the fountain. If you will, Mr. Carroway."

A passing shower had left the plaza wet and slick. Joe dropped the Ethiopian machine pistol first, followed by the matching Glocks. Each time he kicked one of the guns, it would spin and skate across the red bricks, each one ending up within a hand's length of the fountain — an astonishing feat, considering the stakes and his own level of exhaustion.

Unarmed, Joe stood alone in the empty plaza.

The fountain had a round black-granite base, buried pumps shoving water up against a perfect sphere of transparent crystal. The sphere was a monstrous, stylized egg. Inside the egg rode a never-to-be-born creature — some giant beast with wide black eyes and gill slits, its tail half-formed and the stubby little limbs looking as though they could turn into arms or legs, or even tentacles. Joe knew the creature was supposed to be blind, but he couldn't shake the impression that the eyes were watching him. He watched the creature slowly roll over and over again, its egg suspended on nothing but a thin chilled layer of very busy water.

Eventually five shapes emerged from behind the fountain.

"Thank you, Mr. Carroway," said the voice. Then the sound system

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was deactivated, and with a hand to the mouth, one figure shouted, "A little closer, sir. If you will."

That familiar voice accompanied the beckoning arm.

Two figures efficiently disabled Joe's weapons. They were big men, probably Rebirth Neanderthals or some variation on that popular theme. A third man looked like a Brilliance-Boy, his skull tall and deep, stuffed full with a staggering amount of brain tissue. The fourth human was small and slight, held securely by the Brilliance-Boy; even at a distance, she looked decidedly female.

Joe took two steps and paused.

The fifth figure, the one that spoke, approached near enough to show his face. Joe wasn't surprised, but he pretended to be. "Markel? What are you doing here?" He laughed as if nervous. "You're not one of them, are you?"

The man looked as *sapien* as Joe.

With a decidedly human laugh, Markel remarked, "I'm glad to hear that you were fooled, Mr. Carroway. Which of course means that you killed Stanton and Humphrey for no good reason."

Joe said nothing.

"You did come here alone, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Because you took a little longer than I anticipated."

"No I didn't."

"Perhaps not. I could be mistaken."

Markel never admitted to errors. He was a tall fellow, as bald as an egg and not particularly handsome. Which made his disguise all the more effective. The new *Homo* species were always physically attractive, and they were superior athletes, more often than not. Joe had never before met a Rebirth who had gone through the pain and expense and then not bothered to grow some kind of luxurious head of hair as a consequence.

"You have my vial with you, Joseph. Yes?"

"Joe. That's my name." He made a show of patting his chest pocket.

"And the sealed recordings too?"

"Everything you asked for." Joe looked past Markel. "Is that the girl?"

Something about the question amused Markel. "Do you honestly care if she is?"

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"Of course I care."

"Enough to trade away everything and earn her safety?"

Joe said nothing.

"I've studied your files, Joseph. I have read the personality evaluations, and I know all about your corporate security work, and even all those wicked sealed records covering the last three years. It is a most impressive career. But nothing about you, sir — nothing in your nature or your history — strikes me as being sentimental. And I cannot believe that this girl matters enough to convince you to make this exchange."

Joe smiled. "Then why did I come here?"

"That's my question too."

Joe waited for a moment, then suggested, "Maybe it's money?"

"Psychopaths always have a price," Markel replied. "Yes, I guessed it would be something on those lines."

Joe reached into his shirt pocket. The vial was diamond, smaller than a pen and only halfway filled with what looked to be a plain white powder. But embossed along the vial's length were the ominous words: NATURAL KILLER.

"How much do you want for my baby, Joseph?"

"Everything," he said.

"And what does that mean?"

"All the money."

"My wealth? Is that what you're asking for?"

"I'm not asking," Joe said. "Don't be confused, Markel. This is not a negotiation. I am demanding that you and your backers give me every last cent in your coffers. And if not, I will ruin everything that you've worked to achieve. You sons-of-bitches."

Markel had been born *sapien* and gifted, and his minimal and very secret steps to leave his species behind had served to increase both his mind and his capacity for arrogance. But he was stunned to hear the ultimatum. To make such outrageous demands, and in these circumstances! He couldn't imagine anybody with that much gall. Standing quite still, his long arms at his side, Markel tried to understand why an unarmed man in these desperate circumstances would have any power over him. What wasn't he seeing? No reinforcements were coming; he was certain of that. Outside this tiny circle, nobody knew anything. This *sapien* was

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bluffing, Markel decided. And with that, he began to breathe again, and he relaxed, announcing, "You're right, this is not a negotiation. And I'm telling you no."

Inside the same shirt pocket was a child's toy — a completely harmless lump of luminescent putty stolen from a passing giftbot. Joe shoved the vial into the bright red plaything, and before Markel could react, he flung both the putty and vial high into the air.

Every eye watched that ruddy patch of light twirl and soften, and then plunge back to the earth.

Beside the plaza was a deep acid-filled moat flanked by a pair of high fences, electrified and bristling with sensors. And on the far side were woods and darkness, plus the single example of a brand new species designed to bring huge crowds through the zoo's front gate.

The Grendel.

"You should not have done that," Markel said with low, furious voice. "I'll just have you killed now and be done with you."

Joe smiled, lifting his empty hands over his head. "Maybe you should kill me. If you're so positive that you can get your precious Killer back."

That's when Joe laughed at the brilliant bastard.

But it was the girl who reacted first, squirming out of the Brilliance-Boy's hands to run straight for her lover.

No one bothered to chase her down.

She stopped short and slapped Joe.

"You idiot," she spat.

He answered her with a tidy left hook.

Then one of the big soldiers shot a tacky round into Joe's chest, pumping in enough current to drop him on the wet bricks, leaving him hovering between consciousness and white-hot misery.

"You idiot."

The girl repeated herself several times, occasionally adding a dismissive, "Moron," or "Fool," to her invectives. Then as the electricity diminished, she leaned close to his face. "Don't you understand? We were never going to use the bug. We don't want to let it loose. It's just one more way to help make sure you *sapiens* won't declare war on us. Natural Killer is our insurance policy, and that's it."

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The pain diminished to a lasting ache. Wincing, Joe struggled to sit up. While he was down, smart-cuffs had wrapped themselves around his wrists and ankles. The two soldiers and the Brilliance-Boy were standing before the Grendel's large enclosure. They had donned night goggles and were studying the schematics of the zoo, tense voices discussing how best to slip into the cage and recover the prize.

"Joe," she said, "how can you be this stupid?"

"Comes naturally, I guess."

To the eye, the girl was beautiful and purely *sapien*. The long black hair and rich brown skin sparkled in the plaza's light. The word "natural" was a mild insult among the Rebirths. She sat up, lips pouting. Like Markel, the young woman must have endured major revisions of her genetics — far more involved than a few synthetic genes sprinkled about the DNA. Extra pairs of chromosomes were standard among the new humans. But despite rumors that some of the Rebirths were hiding among the naturals, this was the first time Joe had knowingly crossed paths with them.

"I am stupid," he admitted. Then he looked at Markel, adding, "Both of you had me fooled. All along."

That was a lie, but it made Markel smile. Of course he was clever, and of course no one suspected the truth. Behind that grim old face was enough self-esteem to keep him believing that he would survive the night.

The idiot.

Markel and his beautiful assistant glanced at each other.

Then the Brilliance-Boy called out. "We'll use the service entrance to get in," he announced. "Five minutes to circumvent locks and cameras, I should think."

"Do it," Markel told them.

"You'll be all right here?"

The scientist lifted a pistol over his head. "We're fine. Just go. Get my child out of that cage, now!"

That left three people on the plaza, plus the monster locked inside the slowly revolving crystal egg.

"The plague is just an insurance policy, huh?"

Joe threw out the question, and waited.

After a minute, the girl said, "To protect us from people like you, yes."

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He put on an injured expression. "Like me? What's that mean?"

She glanced at Markel. In an acid tone, she said, "He showed me your history, Joe. After our first night together...."

"And what did it tell you?"

"When you were on the *Demon Dandy*, you saved yourself by leaving a Rebirth behind. And you did it in a cold, calculating way."

He shrugged, smiled. "What else?"

"After joining the security arm of the corporation, you distinguished yourself as a soldier. Then you went to work for the U.N., as a contractor, and your expertise has been assassinations."

"Bad men should be killed," Joe said flatly. "Evil should be removed from the world. Get the average person to be honest, and he'll admit that he won't lose any sleep, particularly if the monster is killed with a single clean shot."

"You are horrible," she maintained.

"If I'm so horrible," said Joe, "then do the world a favor. Shoot me in the head."

She began to reach behind her back, then thought better of it.

Markel glanced at both of them, pulling his weapon closer to his body. But nothing seemed urgent, and he returned to keeping watch over the Grendel's enclosure.

"I suppose you noticed," Joe began.

The girl blinked. "Noticed what?"

"In my career, I've killed a respectable number of Rebirths."

The dark eyes stared at him. Very quietly, with sarcasm, she said, "I suppose they were all bad people."

"Drug lords and terrorists, or hired guns in the service of either." Joe shook his head, saying, "Legal murder is easy. Clean, clear-cut. A whole lot more pleasant than the last few weeks have been, I'll admit."

Markel looked at him. "I am curious, Joseph. Who decided you were the ideal person to investigate our little laboratory?"

"You don't have a little lab," said Joe. "There aren't ten or twelve better-equipped facilities when it comes to high-end genetic research."

"There aren't even twelve," the man said, bristling slightly. "Perhaps two or three."

"Well, you wouldn't have found this item in any official file," Joe said.

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"But a couple months ago, I was leading a team that hit a terror cell in Alberta. Under interrogation, the Rebirth boss started making threats about unleashing something called Natural Killer on us. On the poor helpless *sapiens*. He claimed that we'd be wiped out of existence, and the new species could then take over. Which is their right, he claimed, and as inevitable as the next sunrise."

His audience exchanged looks.

"But that hardly explains how you found your way to me," Markel pointed out.

"There was a trail. Bloody in places, but every corpse pointing in your general direction."

Markel almost spoke. But the creak of a heavy door being opened interrupted him. Somewhere in the back of the Grendel's enclosure, three pairs of goggled eyes were peering out into the jungle and shadow.

"It's an amazing disease," Joe stated. "Natural Killer is."

"Quiet," Markel warned.

But the girl couldn't contain herself. She bent low, whispering, "It is," while trying to burn him with her hateful smile.

"The virus targets old, outmoded stretches of the human genome," Joe continued. "From what I can tell — and I'm no expert in biology, of course — but your extra genes guarantee you wouldn't get anything worse than some wicked flu symptoms out of the bug. Is that about right?"

"A tailored pox phage," she said. "Rapidly mutating, but always fatal to *sapiens* genome."

"So who dreamed up the name?" Joe glanced at Markel and then winked at her. "It was you, wasn't it?"

She sat back, grinning.

"And it's going to save you? From bastards like me, is it?"

"You won't dare lift a hand against us," she told Joe. "As soon as you realize we have this weapon, and that it could conceivably wipe your entire species off the face of the Earth...."

"Smart," he agreed. "Very smart."

From the Grendel enclosure came the sharp soft noise of a gun firing. One quick burst and then two single shots from the same weapon. Then, silence.

Markel lifted his pistol reflexively.

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"So when do you Rebirths make your official announcement?" Joe asked. "And how do you handle this kind of event? Hold a news conference? Unless you decide on a demonstration, I suppose. You know, murder an isolated village, or devastate one of the orbital communities. Just to prove to the idiots in the world that you can deliver on your threats."

A voice called from the enclosure: "I have it."

Joe turned in time to see the reddish glow rise off the ground, partly obscured by the strong hand holding it. But as the arm cocked, ready to throw the prize back into the plaza, there was a grunt, almost too soft to be heard. A terrific amount of violence occurred in an instant, without fuss. Then the red glow appeared on a different portion of the jungle floor, and the only sound was the slow lapping of a broad happy tongue.

Markel cursed.

The girl stood up and looked.

Markel called out a name, and nobody answered. And then somebody else fired their weapon in a spray pattern, cutting vegetation and battering the high fence on the far side of the moat.

"I killed it," the second soldier declared. "I'm sure."

The Brilliance-Boy offered a few cautionary words.

"I do feel exceptionally stupid," Joe said. "Tell me again: Why exactly do you need Natural Killer?"

The girl stared at him and then stepped back.

"I didn't know we were waging a real war against you people," he continued. "I guess we keep that a secret, what with our political tricks and PR campaigns. Like when we grant you full citizenship. And the way we force you to accept the costs and benefits of all the laws granted to human beings everywhere — "

"You hate us," she interrupted. "You despise every last one of us."

Quietly, Joe assured her, "You don't know what I hate."

She stiffened, saying nothing.

"This is the situation. As I see it." Joe paused for a moment. "Inside that one vial, you have a bug that could wipe out your alleged enemies. And by enemies, I mean people that look at you with suspicion and fear. You intend to keep your doomsday disease at the ready, just in case you need it."

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"Of course."

"Except you'll have to eventually grow more of it. If you want to keep it as a credible, immediate threat. And you'll have to divide your stocks and store them in scattered, secure locations. Otherwise assholes like me are going to throw the bugs in a pile and burn it all with a torch."

She watched Joe, her sore jaw clamped tight.

"But having stockpiles of Natural Killer brings a different set of problems. Who can trust who not to use it without permission? And the longer this virus exists, the better the chance that the Normals will find effective fixes to keep themselves safe. Vaccines. Quarantine laws. Whatever we need to weather the plague, and of course, give us our chance to take our revenge afterward."

The red glow had not moved. For a full minute, the little jungle had been perfectly, ominously silent.

Markel glanced at Joe and then back at the high fence. He was obviously fighting the urge to shout warnings to the others. That could alert the Grendel. But it took all his will to do nothing.

"You have a great, great weapon," Joe allowed. "But your advantage won't last."

The girl was breathing faster now.

"You know what would be smart? Before the Normals grow aware of your power, you should release the virus. No warnings, no explanations. Do it before we know what hit us, and hope you kill enough of us in the first week that you can permanently gain the upper hand."

"No," Markel said, taking two steps toward the enclosure. "We don't have more than a sample of the virus, and it is just a virus."

"Meaning what?"

"Diseases are like wildfires," he explained. "You watch them burn, and you can't believe that anything would survive the blaze. But afterward there are always islands of green surrounded by scorched forest." The man had given this considerable thought. "Three or four billion *sapiens* might succumb. But that would still leave us in the minority, and we wouldn't be able to handle the retribution."

The girl showed a satisfied smile.

But then Joe said, "Except," and laughed quietly.

The red glow had not moved, and the jungle stood motionless beneath

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the stars. But Markel had to look back at his prisoner, a new terror pushing away the old.

"What do you mean?" the girl asked. "Except what?"

"You and your boss," Joe said. "And who knows how many thousands of others too. Each one of you looks exactly like us. You sound like us." Then he grinned and smacked his lips, adding, "And you taste like us, too. Which means that your particular species, whatever you call yourselves...you'll come out of this nightmare better than anybody...."

The girl's eyes opened wide; a pained breath was taken and then held deep.

"Which of course is the central purpose of this gruesome exercise," Joe said. "I'm sure Dr. Markel would have eventually let you in on his dirty secret. The real scheme hiding behind the first, more public plan."

Too astonished to react, Markel stared at the cuffed, unarmed man sitting on the bricks.

"Is this true?" the girl whispered.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the genius managed to shake his head, lying badly when he said, "Of course not. The man is telling you a crazy wild story, dear."

"And you know why he never told you?" Joe asked.

"Shut up," Markel warned.

The girl was carrying a weapon, just as Joe had guessed. From the back of her pants, she pulled out a small pistol, telling Markel, "Let him talk."

"Darling, he's trying to poison you — "

"Shut up," she snapped.

Then to Joe, she asked, "Why didn't he tell me?"

"Because you're a good decent person, or at least you like to think so. And because he knew how to use that quality to get what he wants." Showing a hint of compassion, Joe sighed. "Markel sure knows how to motivate you. First, he makes you sleep with me. And then he shows you my files, convincing you that I can't be trusted or ignored. Which is why you slept with me three more times. Just to keep a close watch over me."

The girl lowered her pistol, and she sobbed and then started to lift the pistol again.

"Put that down," Markel said.

She might have obeyed, given another few moments to think. But

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Markel shot her three times. He did it quickly and lowered his weapon afterward, astonished that he had done this very awful thing. It took his great mind a long sloppy moment to wrap itself around the idea that he could murder in that particular fashion, that he possessed such brutal, prosaic power. Then he started to lift his gun again, searching for Joe.

But Joe, wrists and feet bound, was already rolling to the dead girl's body. And with her little gun, he put a bullet into Markel's forehead.

The blind, unborn monster watched the drama from inside its crystal egg.

A few moments later, a bloody Brilliance-Boy ran up to the Grendel's fence, and with a joyous holler flung the red putty and diamond vial back onto the plaza. Then he turned and fired twice at shadows before something monstrous lifted him high, shook him once, and folded him backward before neatly tearing him in two.

III. The Ticking Bomb

"GOODNESS," the prisoner muttered. "It's the legend himself."

Joe said nothing.

"Well, now I feel especially terrified." She laughed weakly before coughing, a dark bubble of blood clinging to the split corner of her mouth. Then she closed her eyes for a moment, suppressing her pain as she turned her head to look straight at him. "You must be planning all kinds of horrors," she said. "Savage new ways to break my spirit. To bare my soul."

Gecko slippers gripped the wall. Joe watched the prisoner. He opened his mouth as if to speak but then closed it again, one finger idly scratching a spot behind his left ear.

"I won't be scared," she decided. "This is an honor, having someone this famous assigned to my case. I must be considered an exceptionally important person."

He seemed amused, if just for a moment.

"But I'm not a person, am I? In your eyes, I'm just another animal."

What she was was a long, elegant creature — the ultimate marriage between human traditions and synthetic chromosomes. Four bare arms

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were restrained with padded loops and pulled straight out from the shockingly naked body. Because hair could be a bother in space, she had none. Because dander was an endless source of dirt in freefall, her skin would peel away periodically, not unlike the worn skin of a cobra. She was smart, but not in the usual ways that the two or three thousand species of Rebirths enhanced their minds. Her true genius lay in social skills. Among the Antfolk, she could instantly recognize every face and recall each name, knowing at least ten thousand nest-mates as thoroughly as two *sapiens* who had been life-long pals. Even among the alien faces of traditional humans, she was a marvel at reading faces, deciphering postures. Every glance taught her something more about her captors. Each careless word gave her room to maneuver. That's why the first team — a pair of low-ranking interrogators, unaware of her importance — was quickly pulled from her case. She had used what was obvious, making a few offhand observations, and in the middle of their second session, the two officers had started to trade insults and then punches.

"A Carroway-worthy moment," had been the unofficial verdict.

A second, more cautious team rode the skyhook up from Quito, and they were wise enough to work their prisoner without actually speaking to her. Solitude and sensory deprivation were the tools of choice. Without adequate stimulation, an Antfolk would crumble. And the method would have worked, except that three or four weeks would have been required. But time was short: Several intelligence sources delivered the same ominous warning. This was not just another low-level prisoner. The Antfolk, named Glory, was important. Maybe essential. Days mattered now, even hours. Which was why a third team went to work immediately, doing their awful best from the reassuring confines of a U.N. bunker set two kilometers beneath the Matterhorn.

That new team consisted of AIs and autodocs with every compassion system deleted. Through the careful manipulation of pain and hallucinogenic narcotics, they managed to dislodge a few nuggets of intelligence as well as a level of hatred and malevolence that they had never before witnessed.

"The bomb is mine," she screamed. "I helped design it, and I helped build it. Antimatter triggers the fusion reaction, and it's compact and efficient, and shielded to where it's nearly invisible. I even selected our

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target. Believe me...when my darling detonates, everything is going to change!"

At that point, their prisoner died.

Reviving her wasted precious minutes. But that was ample time for the machines to discuss the obvious possibilities and then calculate various probabilities. In the time remaining, what could be done? And what was impossible? Then without a shred of ego or embarrassment, they contacted one of the only voices that they considered more talented than themselves.

And now Joe stood before the battered prisoner.

Again, he scratched at his ear.

Time hadn't touched him too roughly. He was in his middle forties, but his boyish good looks had been retained through genetics and a sensible indifference to sunshine. Careful eyes would have noticed the fatigue in his body, his motions. A veteran soldier could have recognized the subtle erosion of spirit. And a studied gaze of the kind that an Antfolk would employ would detect signs of weakness and doubt that didn't quite fit when it came to one of the undisputed legends of this exceptionally brutal age.

Joe acted as if there was no hurry. But his heart was beating too fast, his belly roiling with nervous energy. And the corners of his mouth were a little too tight, particularly when he looked as if he wanted to speak.

"What are you going to do with me?" his prisoner inquired.

And again, he scratched at his scalp, something about his skin bothering him to distraction.

She was puzzled, slightly.

"Say something," Glory advised.

"I'm a legend, am I?" The smile was unchanged, bright and full; but behind the polished teeth and bright green eyes was a quality...some trace of some subtle emotion that the prisoner couldn't quite name.

She was intrigued.

"I know all about you," Glory explained. "I know your career in detail, successes and failures both."

For an instant, Joe looked at the lower pair of arms, following the long bones to where they met within the reconfigured hips.

"Want to hear something ironic?" she asked.

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"Always."

"The asteroid you were planning to mine? Back during your brief, eventful career as an astronaut, I mean. It's one of ours now."

"Until your bomb goes boom," he said. "And then that chunk of iron and humanity is going to be destroyed. Along with every other nest of yours, I would guess."

"Dear man. Are you threatening me?"

"You would be the better judge of that."

She managed to laugh. "I'm not particularly worried."

He said nothing.

"Would we take such an enormous risk if we didn't have the means to protect ourselves?"

Joe stared at her for a long while. Then he looked beyond her body, at a random point on the soft white wall. Quietly he asked, "Who am I?"

She didn't understand the question.

"You've seen some little digitals of me. Supposedly you've peeked at my files. But do you know for sure who I am?"

She nearly laughed. "Joseph Carroway."

He closed his eyes.

"Security," he said abruptly. "I need you here. Now."

Whatever was happening, it was interesting. Despite the miseries inflicted on her mind and aching body, the prisoner twisted her long neck, watching three heavily armed soldiers kick their way into her cell.

"This is an emergency," Joe announced. "I need everybody. Your full squad in here now."

The ranking officer was a small woman with the bulging muscles of a steroid hopper. A look of genuine admiration showed in her face. She knew all about Joe Carroway. Who didn't? But her training and regulations held sway. This man might have saved the Earth, on one or several occasions, but she still had the fortitude to remind him, "I can't bring everybody in here. That's against regulations."

Joe nodded.

Sighing, he said, "Then we'll just have to make do."

In an instant, with a smooth, almost beautiful motion, he grabbed the officer's face and broke her jaw and then pulled a weapon from his pocket, shoving the stubby barrel into the nearest face.

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The pistol made a soft, almost negligible sound.

The remains of the skull were scattered into the face of the next guard.

He shot that soldier twice and then killed the commanding officer before grabbing up her weapon, using his security code to override its safety and then leaping into the passageway. The prisoner strained at her bonds. Mesmerized, she counted the soft blasts and the shouts, and she stared, trying to see through the spreading fog of blood and shredded brain matter. Then a familiar figure reappeared, moving with commendable grace despite having a body designed to trek across the savannas of Africa.

"We have to go," said Joe. "Now." He was carrying a fresh gun and jumpsuit.

"I don't believe this," she managed.

He cut her bonds and said, "Didn't think you would." Then he paused, just for an instant. "Joe Carroway was captured and killed three years ago, during the Tranquility business. I'm the lucky man they spliced together to replace that dead asshole."

"You're telling me — ?"

"Suit up. Let's go, lady."

"You can't be." She was numb, fighting to understand what was possible, no matter how unlikely. "What species of Rebirth are you?"

"I was an Eagle," he said.

She stared at the face. Never in her life had she tried so hard to slice through skin and eyes, fighting to decipher what was true.

"Suit up," he said again.

"But I don't see — ?"

Joe turned suddenly, launching a recoilless bundle out into the hall. The detonation was a soft crack, smart-shards aiming only for armor and flesh. Sparing the critical hull surrounding them.

"We'll have to fight our way to my ship," he warned.

Slowly, with stiff clumsy motions, she dressed herself. As the suit retailored itself to match her body, she said again, "I don't believe you. I don't believe any of this."

Now Joe stared at her.

Hard.

"What do you think, lady?" he asked. "You rewrote your own biology in a thousand crazy ways. But one of your brothers — a proud Eagle — isn't

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able to reshape himself? He can't take on the face of your worst enemy? He can't steal the dead man's memories? He is allowed this kind of power, all in a final bid to get revenge for what that miserable shit's done to us?"

She dipped her head.

No, she didn't believe him.

But three hours later, as they were making the long burn out of Earth orbit, a flash of blue light announced the abrupt death of fifty million humans and perhaps half a million innocents.

"A worthy trade," said the man strapped into the seat beside her.

And that was the moment when Glory finally offered two of her hands to join up with one of his, and after that, her other two hands as well.

Her nest was the nearest Antfolk habitat. Waiting at the moon's L5 Lagrange point, the asteroid was a smooth blackish ball, heat-absorbing armor slathered deep over the surface of a fully infested cubic kilometer — a city where thousands of bodies squirmed about in freefall, thriving inside a maze of warm tunnels and airy rooms. Banks of fusion reactors powered factories and the sun-bright lights. Trim, enduring ecosystems created an endless feast of edible gruel and free oxygen. The society was unique, at least within the short rich history of the Rebirths. Communal and technologically adept, this species had accomplished much in a very brief period. That's why it was so easy for them to believe that they alone now possessed the keys to the universe.

Joe was taken into custody. Into quarantine. Teams drawn from security and medical castes tried to piece together the truth, draining off his blood and running electrodes into his skull, inflicting him with induced emotions and relentless urges to be utterly, perfectly honest.

The Earth's counterassault arrived on schedule — lasers and missiles followed by robot shock troops. But the asteroid's defense network absorbed every blow. Damage was minor, casualties light, and before larger attacks could be organized, the Antfolk sent an ultimatum to the U.N.: One hundred additional fusion devices had been smuggled to the Earth's surface, each now hidden and secured, waiting for any excuse to erupt.

For the good of humankind, the Antfolk were claiming dominion over everything that lay beyond the Earth's atmosphere. Orbital facilities and

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the lunar cities would be permitted, but only if reasonable rents were paid. Other demands included nationhood status for each of the Rebirth species, reimbursements for all past wrongs, and within the next year, the total and permanent dismantling of the United Nations.

Both sides declared a ragged truce.

Eight days later, Joe was released from his cell, guards escorting him along a tunnel marked by pheromones and infrared signatures. Glory was waiting, wearing her best gown and a wide, hopeful smile. The Antfolk man beside her seemed less sure. He was a giant hairless creature: Leader of the nest's political caste, he glared at the muscular *sapien*, and with a cool smooth voice said, "The tunnel before you splits, Mr. Carroway. Which way will you travel?"

"What are my choices?" asked the prisoner.

"Death now," the man promised. "Or death in some ill-defined future."

"I think I prefer the future," he said. Then he glanced at Glory, meeting her worried smile with a wink and slight nod.

The look that Glory shot her superior was filled with meaning and hope.

"I don't relish the idea of trusting you," the man confessed. "But every story you've told us, with words and genetics, has been confirmed by every available source. You were once a man named Magnificent. We see traces of your original DNA inside what used to be Joseph Carroway. It seems that our old enemy was indeed taken prisoner during the Luna Revolt. The Eagles were a talented bunch. They may well have camouflaged you inside Mr. Carroway's body and substance. A sorry thing that the species was exterminated — save for you, of course. But once this new war is finished, I promise you: my people will reconstitute yours as well as your culture, to the best of our considerable abilities."

Joe dipped his head. "I can only hope to see that day, sir."

The man had giant white eyes and tiny blond teeth. Watching the prisoner did no good; he could not read this man's soul. So he turned to Glory, prompting her with the almost invisible flick of a finger.

She told Joe, "The U.N. attack was almost exactly as you expected it to be, and your advice proved extremely useful. Thank you."

Joe showed a smug little smile.

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"And you've told us a lot we didn't know," Glory continued. "Those ten agents on Pallas. The Deimos booby trap. And how the U.N. would go about searching for the rest of our nuclear devices."

"Are your bombs safe?"

She glanced at her superior, finding encouragement in some little twitch of the face. Then she said, "Yes."

"Do you want to know their locations?" the man asked Joe.

"No."

Then in the next breath, Joe added, "And I hope you don't know that either, sir. You're too much of a target, should somebody grab you up."

"More good advice," the man replied.

That was the instant when Joe realized that he wouldn't be executed as a precaution. More than three years of careful preparation had led to this: The intricate back-story and genetic trickery were his ideas. Carrying off every aspect of this project, from the Eagle's identity to his heightened capacity to read bodies and voices, was the end result of hard training. Hundreds of specialists, all AIs, had helped produce the new Joseph Carroway. And then each one of those machines was wiped stupid and melted to an anonymous slag.

On that day when he dreamed up this outrageous plan, the Antfolk were still just one of a dozen Rebirths that might or might not cause trouble someday.

Nobody could have planned for these last weeks.

Killing the guards to free the woman was an inspiration and a necessity, and he never bothered to question it. One hundred fusion bombs were scattered across a helpless, highly vulnerable planet, and setting them off would mean billions dead, and perhaps civilization too. Sacrificing a few soldiers to protect the rest of the world was a plan born of simple, pure mathematics.

The Antfolk man coughed softly. "From this point on, Joe...or should I call you Magnificent?"

With an appealing smile, he said, "I've grown attached to Joe."

The other two laughed gently. Then the man said, "For now, you are my personal guest. And except for security bracelets and a bomblet planted inside your skull, you will be given the freedoms and responsibilities expected of all worthy visitors."

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"Then I am grateful," said Joe. "Thank you to your nation and to your good species, sir. Thank you so much."

The truce was shattered with one desperate assault — three brigades of shock troops riding inside untested star-drive boosters, supported by every weapon system and reconfigured com-laser available to the U.N. The cost was twenty thousand dead *sapiens* and a little less than a trillion dollars. One platoon managed to insert itself inside Joe's nest, but when the invaders grabbed the nursery and a thousand young hostages, he distinguished himself by helping plan and then lead the counterstrike. All accounts made him the hero. He killed several of the enemy, and alone, he managed to disable the warhead that would have shattered their little world. But even the most grateful mother insisted on looking at their savior with detached pleasure. Trust was impossible. Joe's face was too strange, his reputation far too familiar. Pheromones delivered the mandatory thanks, and there were a few cold gestures wishing the hero well. But there were insults too, directed at him and at the long lovely woman who was by now sleeping with him.

In retribution for that final attack, the Antfolk detonated a second nuclear weapon, shearing off one slope of the Hawai'i volcano and killing eight million with the resulting tsunami.

Nine days later, the U.N. collapsed, reformed from the wreckage and then shattered again before the next dawn. What rose from that sorry wreckage enjoyed both the laws to control every aspect of the mother world and the mandate to beg for their enemies' mercy.

The giants in the sky demanded, and subsequently won, each of their original terms.

For another three months, Joe lived inside the little asteroid, enduring a never-subtle shunning.

Then higher powers learned of his plight and intervened. For the next four years, he traveled widely across the new empire, always in the company of Glory, the two of them meeting an array of leaders, scientists, and soldiers — that last group as suspicious as any, but ever eager to learn whatever little tricks the famous Carroway might share with them.

To the end, Joe remained under constant observation. Glory made daily reports about his behaviors and her own expert impressions. Their

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relationship originally began under orders from Pallas, but when she realized that they might well remain joined until one or both died, she discovered, to her considerable surprise, that she wasn't displeased with her fate.

In the vernacular of her species, she had floated into love...and so what if the object of her affections was an apish goon?

During their journey, they visited twenty little worlds, plus Pallas and Ceres and Vesta. The man beside her was never out of character. He was intense and occasionally funny, and he was quick to learn and astute with his observations about life inside the various nests. Because it would be important for the last member of a species, Joe pushed hard for the resurrection of the fabled Eagles. Final permission came just as he and Glory were about to travel to outer moons of Jupiter. Three tedious, painful days were spent inside the finest biogenic lab in the solar system. Samples of bone and marrow and fat and blood were cultured, and delicate machines rapidly separated what had been Joe from the key traces of the creature that had been dubbed Magnificent.

A long voyage demands large velocities, which was why the transport ship made an initial high-gee burn. The crew and passengers were strapped into elaborate crash seats, their blood laced with comfort drugs, eyes and minds distracted by immersion masks. Six hours after they leaped clear of Vesta, Joe disabled each of his tracking bracelets and the bomblet inside his head, and then he slipped out of his seat, fighting the terrific acceleration as he worked his way to the bridge.

The transport was an enormous, utterly modern spaceship. The watch officer was on the bridge, stretched out in his own crash seat. Instantly suspicious and without even the odor of politeness, he demanded that his important passenger leave at once. Joe smiled for a moment. Then he turned without complaint or hesitation, showing his broad back to the spidery fellow before he climbed out of view.

What killed the officer was a fleck of dust carrying microchines — a fleet of tiny devices that attacked essential genes found inside the Antfolk metabolism, causing a choking sensation, vomiting and soon death.

Joe returned to the bridge and sent a brief, heavily coded message to the Earth. Then he did a cursory job of destroying the ship's security systems. With luck, he had earned himself a few hours of peace. But when

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he returned to his cabin, Glory was gone. She had pulled herself out her seat, or somebody had roused her. For a moment, he touched the deep padding, allowing the sheets to wrap around his arm and hand, and he carefully measured the heat left behind by her long, lovely body.

"Too bad," he muttered.

The transport carried five fully equipped lifepods. Working fast, Joe killed the hangar's robots and both of the resident mechanics. He dressed in the only pressure suit configured for his body and crippled all but one of the pods. His plan was to flee without fuss. The pods had potent engines and were almost impossible to track. There was no need for more corpses and mayhem. But he wanted a back-up plan, that's what he was working on when the ship's engines abruptly cut out.

A few minutes later, an armed team crawled into the hangar through a random vent.

There was no reason to fight, since Joe was certain to lose.

Instead he surrendered his homemade weapons and looked past the nervous crew, finding the lovely hairless face that he knew better than his own.

"What did you tell them?" Glory asked.

"Tell who?"

"Your people," she said. "The Earth."

Glory didn't expect answers, much less any honest words. But the simple fact was that whatever he said now and did now was inconsequential: Joe would survive or die in this cold realm, but what happened next would change nothing that was about to happen elsewhere.

"Your little home nest," he began.

She drifted forward, and then hesitated.

"It will be dead soon," he promised. "And nothing can be done to save it."

"Is there a bomb?"

"No," he said. "A microchine plague. I brought it with me when I snatched you away, Glory. It was hiding inside my bones."

"But you were tested," she said.

"Not well enough."

"We hunted for diseases," she insisted. "Agents. Toxins. We have the best minds anywhere, and we searched you inside and out...and found nothing remotely dangerous."

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He watched the wind leak out of her. Then very quietly, Joe admitted, "You might have the best minds. And best by a long ways. But we have a lot more brains down on the Earth, and I promise, a few of us are a good deal meaner than even you could ever be."

Enduring torture, Glory never looked this frail or sad.

Joe continued. "Every world you've taken me to is contaminated. I made certain of that. And since you managed to set off two bombs on my world, the plan is to obliterate two of your worlds. After that, if you refuse to surrender, it's fair to guess that every bomb and disease on both sides is going be set free. Then in the end, nobody wins. Ever."

Glory could not look at him.

Joe laughed, aiming to humiliate.

He said, "I don't care how smart or noble you are. Like everybody else, you're nothing but meat and scared brains. And now you've been thrown into a dead-end tunnel, and I am Death standing at the tunnel's mouth.

"The clock is ticking. Can you make the right decision?"

Glory made a tiny, almost invisible motion with her smallest finger, betraying her intentions.

Joe leaped backward. The final working lifepod was open, and he dove inside as its hatch slammed shut, moments before the doomed could manage one respectable shot. Then twenty weapons were firing at a hull designed to shrug off the abuse of meteors and *sapien* weapons. Joe pulled himself into the pilot's ill-fitting chair, and once he was strapped down, he triggered his just-finished booby trap.

The fuel onboard two other pods exploded.

With a silent flash of light, the transport shattered, spilling its contents across the black and frigid wilderness.

IV. The Assassin

"EAT," THE VOICE insisted. "Don't our dead heroes deserve their feast?"

"So that's what I am?"

"A hero? Absolutely, my friend!"

"I meant that I'm dead." Joe looked across the table, measuring his host — an imposing Chinese-Indian male wearing the perfect suit and a

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face conditioned to convey wisdom and serene authority. "I realize that I got lost for a time," he admitted. "But I never felt particularly deceased."

"Perhaps that's how the dead perceive their lot. Yes?"

Joe nodded amiably, and using his stronger arm, stabbed at his meal. Even in lunar gravity, every motion was an effort.

"Are your rehabilitations going well?"

"They tell me that I'm making some progress."

"Modesty doesn't suit you, my friend. My sources assure me that you are amazing your trainers. And I think you know that perfectly well."

The meat was brown and sweet, like duck, but without the grease.

"Presently you hold the record, Joe."

Joe looked up again.

"Five and a half years in freefall," said Mr. Li, slowly shaking his head. "Assumed dead, and in your absence, justly honored for the accomplishments of an intense and extremely successful life. I'm sorry no one was actively searching for you, sir. But no Earth-based eye saw the Antfolks' spaceship explode, much less watched the debris scatter. So we had no starting point, and to make matters worse, your pod had a radar signature little bigger than a fist. You were very fortunate to be where you happened to be, drifting back into the inner solar system. And you were exceptionally lucky to be noticed by that little mining ship. And just imagine your reception if that ship's crew had been anyone but *sapiens*...."

The billionaire let his voice trail away.

Joe had spent years wandering through the solar system, shepherding his food and riding roughshod over his recycling systems. That the lifepod was designed to carry a dozen bodies was critical; he wouldn't have lasted ten months inside a lesser bucket. But the explosion that destroyed the transport damaged the pod, leaving it dumb and deaf. Joe had soon realized that nobody knew where he was, or even that he was. After the first year, he calculated that he might survive for another eight, but it would involve more good luck and hard focus than even he might have been able to summon.

"I want to tell you, Joe. When I learned about your survival, I was thrilled. I turned to my dear wife and my children and told everybody, 'This man is a marvel. He is a wonder. A one-in-a-trillion kind of *sapien*.'"

Joe laughed quietly.

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"Oh, I'm well-studied in Joseph Carroway's life," his host boasted. "After the war, humanity wanted to know who to thank for saving the Earth. That's why the U.N. released portions of your files. Millions of us became amateur scholars. I myself acquired some of the less doctored accounts of your official history. I've also read your five best biographies, and just like every other *sapien*, I have enjoyed your immersion drama — *Warrior on the Ramparts*. As a story, it takes dramatic license with your life. Of course. But *Warrior* was and is a cultural phenomenon, Joe. A stirring tale of courage and bold skill in the midst of wicked, soulless enemies."

Joe set his fork beside the plate.

"After all the misery and death of these last two decades," said Mr. Li, "the world discovered the one man who could be admired, even emulated. A champion for the people."

He said the word "People" with a distinct tone.

Then Mr. Li added, "Even the Rebirths paid to see *Warrior*. Paid to read the books and the sanitized files. Which is nicely ironic, isn't it? Your actions probably saved millions of them. Without your bravery, how many species would be ash and bone today?"

Joe lifted his fork again. A tenth of his life had been spent away from gravity and meaningful exercise. His bones as well as the connecting muscles had withered to where some experts, measuring the damage, cautioned their patient to expect no miracles. It didn't help that cosmic radiation had slashed through the pod's armor and through him. Even now, the effects of malnutrition could be seen in the spidery hands and forearms, and how his own lean meat hung limp on his suddenly ancient bones.

Mr. Li paused for a moment, an observant smile building. Whatever he said next would be important.

Joe interrupted, telling him, "Thank you for the meal, sir."

"And thank you for being who you are, sir."

When Joe left the realm of the living, this man was little more than an average billionaire. But the last five years had been endlessly lucrative for Li Enterprises. Few had more money, and when ambition was thrown into the equation, perhaps no other private citizen wielded the kind of power enjoyed by the man sitting across the little table.

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Joe stabbed a buttery carrot.

"Joe?"

He lowered the carrot to the plate.

"Can you guess why I came to the moon? Besides to meet you over dinner, of course."

Joe decided on a shy, self-deprecating smile.

This encouraged his host. "And do you have any idea what I wish to say to you? Any intuitions at all?"

Six weeks ago, Joe had abruptly returned to the living. But it took three weeks to rendezvous with a hospital ship dispatched just for him, and that vessel didn't touch down on the moon until the day before yesterday. Those two crews and his own research had shown Joe what he meant to the human world. He was a hero and a rich but controversial symbol. And he was a polarizing influence in a great debate that still refused to die — an interspecies conflict forever threatening to bring on another terrible war.

Joe knew exactly what the man wanted from him, but he decided to offer a lesser explanation.

"You're a man with enemies," he mentioned.

Mr. Li didn't need to ask, "Who are my enemies?" Both men understood what was being discussed.

"You need somebody qualified in charge of your personal security," Joe suggested.

The idea amused Mr. Li. But he laughed a little too long, perhaps revealing a persistent unease in his own safety. "I have a fine team of private bodyguards," he said at last. "A team of *sapiens* who would throw their lives down to protect mine."

Joe waited.

"Perhaps you aren't aware of this, sir. But our recent tragedies have changed our government. The U.N. presidency now commands a surprising amount of authority. But he, or she, is still elected by adult citizens. A pageant that maintains the very important illusion of a genuine, self-sustaining democracy."

Joe leaned across the table, nodding patiently.

"Within the next few days," said Mr. Li, "I will announce my candidacy for that high office. A few months later, I will win my party's

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primary elections. But I'm a colorless merchant with an uneventful life story. I need to give the public one good reason to stand in my camp. What I have to find is a recognizable name that will inspire passions on both sides of the issues."

"You need a dead man," Joe said.

"And what do you think about that, sir?"

"That I'm still trapped in that damned pod." Leaning back in his chair, Joe sighed. "I'm starving to death, bored to tears, and dreaming up this insanity just to keep me a little bit sane."

"Sane or not, do you say yes?"

He showed his host a thoughtful expression. Then very quietly, with the tone of a joke, Joe asked, "So which name sits first on the ballot?"

As promised, Mr. Li easily won the Liberty Party's nomination, and with a force-fed sense of drama, the candidate announced his long-secret choice for running mate. By then Joe had recovered enough to endure the Earth's relentless tug. He was carried home by private shuttle, and with braces under his trouser legs and a pair of lovely and strong women at his side, the celebrated war hero strode into an auditorium/madhouse. Every motion had been practiced, every word scripted, yet somehow the passion and heart of the event felt genuine. Supporters and employees of the candidate pushed against one another, fighting for a better look at the running mate. With a natural sense for when to pause and how to wave at the world, Joe's chiseled, scarred face managed to portray that essential mixture of fearlessness and sobriety. Li greeted him with open arms — the only time the two men would ever embrace. Buoyed by the crowd's energy, Joe felt strong, but when he decided to sit, he almost collapsed into his chair. Li was a known quantity; everyone kept watch over the new man. When Joe studied his boss, he used an expression easily confused for admiration. The acceptance speech was ten minutes of carefully crafted theater designed to convey calm resolve wrapped around coded threats. For too long, Li said, their old honorable species had allowed its traditions to be undercut and diluted. When unity mattered, people followed every path. When solidarity was a virtue, evolution and natural selection were replaced by whim and caprice. But the new leadership would right these past wrongs. Good

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men and good women had died in the great fight, and new heroes were being discovered every day. (Li glanced at his running mate, winning a burst of applause; and Joe nodded at his benefactor, showing pride swirled with modesty.) The speech concluded with a promise for victory in the general election, in another six weeks, and Joe applauded with everyone else. But he stood slowly, as if weak, shaking as an old man might shake.

He was first to offer his hand of congratulations to the candidate.

And he was first to sit again, feigning the aching fatigue that he had earned over these last five years.

Three days later, a lone sniper was killed outside the arena where the controversial running mate was scheduled to appear. Joe's security detail was led by a career police officer, highly qualified and astonishingly efficient. Using a quiet, unperturbed tone, he explained what had happened, showing his boss images of the would-be assassin.

"She's all *sapien*," he mentioned. "But with ties to the Rebirths. A couple lovers, and a lot of politics."

Joe scanned the woman's files as well the pictures. "Was the lady working alone?"

"As far as I can tell, yes. Sir."

"What's this gun?"

"Homemade," the officer explained. "An old Czech design grown in a backyard nano-smelter. She probably thought it would make her hard to trace. And I suppose it would have: An extra ten minutes to track her down through the isotope signatures and chine-marks."

Joe asked, "How accurate?"

"The rifle? Well, with that sight and in competent hands — "

"Her hands, I mean. Was she any good?"

"We don't know yet, sir." The officer relished these occasional conversations. After all, Joe Carroway had saved humanity on at least two separate occasions, and always against very long odds. "I suppose she must have practiced her marksmanship somewhere. But the thing is...."

"What?"

"This barrel isn't as good as it should be. Impurities in the ceramics,

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and the heat of high-velocity rounds had warped it. Funny as it sounds, the more your killer practiced, the worse her gun would have become."

Joe smiled and nodded.

The officer nodded with him, waiting for the legend to speak.

"It might have helped us," Joe mentioned. "If we'd let her take a shot or two, I mean."

"Help us?"

"In the polls."

The officer stared at him for a long moment. The dry Carroway humor was well known. Was this a worthy example? He studied the man whom he was sworn to defend, and after considerable reflection, the officer decided to laugh weakly and shrug his shoulders. "But what if she got off one lucky shot?"

Joe laughed quietly. "I thought that's what I was saying."

To be alone, Joe took a lover.

The young woman seemed honored and more than a little scared. After passing through security, they met inside his hotel room, and when the great man asked to send a few messages through her links, she happily agreed. Nothing about those messages would mean anything to anybody. But when they reached their destinations, other messages that had waited for years were released, winding their way to the same secure e-vault. Afterward Joe had sex with her, and then she let him fix her a drink that he laced with sedatives. Once she was asleep, he donned arm and leg braces designed for the most demanding physical appearances. Then Joe opened a window, and ten stories above the bright cold city, he climbed out onto the narrow ledge and slipped through the holes that he had punched in the security net.

Half an hour later, shaking from exhaustion, Joe was standing at the end of a long alleyway.

"She was a mistake," he told the shadows.

There was no answer.

"A blunder," he said.

"Was she?" a deep voice asked.

"But you were always a little too good at inspiring others," Joe continued. "Getting people to be eager, making them jump before they were ready."

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In the darkness, huge lungs took a deep, lazy breath.

Then the voice mentioned, "I could kill you myself. I could kill you now." It was deep and slow, and the voice always sounded a little amused. Just a little. "No guards protecting you, and from what I see, you aren't carrying more than a couple baby pistols."

Joe said, "That's funny."

Silence.

"I'm not the one you want," he said. "You'd probably settle for me. But think about our history, friend. Look past all the public noise. And now remember everything that's happened between you and me."

Against an old brick wall, a large body stirred. Then the voice said, "Remind me."

Joe mentioned, "Baltimore."

"Yes."

"And Singapore."

"We helped each other there."

"And what about Kiev?"

"I was in a gracious mood. A weak mood, looking back."

Joe smiled. "Regardless of moods, you let me live."

The voice seemed to change, rising from a deeper part of the unseen body. It sounded wetter and very warm, admitting, "I knew what you were, Joe. I understood how you thought, and between us, I felt we had managed an understanding."

"We had that, yes."

"You have always left my species alone."

"No reason not to."

"We weren't any threat to you."

"You've never been in trouble, until now."

"But this man you are helping...this Li monster...he is an entirely different kind of creature, I believe...."

Joe said nothing.

"And you are helping him. Don't deny it."

"I won't."

A powerful sigh came from the dark, carrying the smell of raw fish and peppermint.

"Two days from now...," Joe began.

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"That would be the Prosperity Conference."

"The monster and I will be together, driving through São Paulo. Inside a secure vehicle, surrounded by several platoons of soldiers."

"I would imagine so."

"Do you know our route?"

"No, as it happens. Do you?"

"Not yet."

The shadows said nothing, and they didn't breathe, and they held themselves still enough that it was possible to believe that they had slipped away entirely.

Then very softly, the voice asked, "When will you learn the route?"

"Tomorrow night."

"But as you say, the level of protection will be considerable."

"So you want things to be easy? Is that it?"

The laugh was smooth, unhurried. "I want to know your intentions, Joe. Having arranged this collision of forces, what will you do? Pretend to fall ill at the last moment? Stand on the curb and offer a hearty wave as your benefactor rolls off to his doom?"

"Who says I won't ride along?"

This time the laugh was louder, confident and honestly amused. "Suppose you learn the route and share it with me. And imagine that despite my logistical nightmares, I have time enough to assemble the essential forces. Am I to understand that you will be riding into that worst kind of trouble?"

"I've survived an ambush or two."

"When you were young. And you still had luck to spend."

Joe said nothing.

"But you do have a reasonable point," the voice continued. "If you aren't riding with the monster, questions will be asked. Doubts will rise. Your character might have to endure some rather hard scrutiny."

"Sure, that's one fine reason to stay with him."

"And another is?"

"You fall short. You can't get to Li in the end. So don't you want to have a second option in place, just in case?"

"What option?"

"Me."

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That earned a final long laugh.

"Point taken, my friend. Point taken."

The limousine could have been smaller and less pretentious, but the man strapped into its safest seat would accept nothing less than a rolling castle. And following the same kingly logic, the limousine's armor and its plasma weapons were just short of spectacular. The AI driver was capable of near-miracles, if it decided to flee. But in this vehicle, in most circumstances, the smart tactic would be to stand its ground and fight. One hundred *sapien* soldiers and ten times as many mechanicals were traveling the same street, sweeping for enemies and the possibility of enemies. In any battle, they would count for quite a lot, unless of course some of them were turned, either through tricks or bribery. Which was as much consideration as Joe gave to the problem of attacking the convoy. Effort wasted was time lost. What mattered was the next ten or eleven minutes and how he handled himself and how he managed to control events within his own limited reach.

Li and two campaign wizards were conferring at the center of the limousine. Polls were a painful topic. They were still critical points behind the frontrunners, and the propaganda wing of his empire was getting worried. Ideas for new campaigns were offered, and then buried. Finally the conversation fell into glowering silences and hard looks at a floor carpeted with cultured white ermine.

That was when Joe unfastened his harness and approached.

Li seemed to notice him. But his assistant — a cold little Swede named Hussein — took the trouble to ask, "What do you need, Mr. Carroway?"

"Just want to offer my opinion," he said.

"Opinion? About what?"

Joe made a pistol with his hand and pointed it at Hussein, and then he jerked so suddenly that the man flinched.

"What is it, Joe?" asked Li.

"People are idiots," Joe said.

The candidate looked puzzled, but a moment later, something about those words intrigued him. "In what way?"

"We can't see into the future."

"We can't?"

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"None of us can," said Joe. He showed a smile, a little wink. "Not even ten seconds ahead, in some cases."

"Yet we do surprisingly well despite our limitations." The candidate leaned back, trying to find the smoothest way to dismiss this famous name.

"We can't see tomorrow," said Joe, "but we are shrewd."

"People, you mean?"

"Particularly when ten billion of us are thinking hard about the same problem. And that's why you aren't going to win this race. Nobody sees what will happen, but in this case, it's very easy to guess how the Li presidency will play out."

Hussein bristled.

But Li told him and everyone else to let the man speak.

"You're assuming that I hate these other species," Joe told him. "In fact, you've counted on it from the start. But the truth is...I don't have any compelling attachment to *sapiens*. By and large, I am a genuinely amoral creature. While you, sir...you are a bigot and a genocidal asshole. And should you ever come to power, the solar system has a respectable chance of collapsing into full-scale civil war."

Li took a moment. Then he pointed out, "In my life, I have killed no one. Not a single Rebirth, or for that matter, a *sapien*."

"Where I have slaughtered thousands," Joe admitted. "And stood aside while millions more died."

"Maybe you are my problem. Perhaps we should drop you from the ticket."

"That is an option," Joe agreed.

"Is this what you wanted to say to me? That you wish to quit?"

Joe gave the man a narrow, hard-to-read smile.

"My life," he said.

"Pardon?" Li asked.

"Early in life, I decided to live as if I was very important. As if I was blessed in remarkable ways. In my hand, I believed, were the keys to a door that would lead to a worthy future, and all that was required of me was that I make hard calculations about matters that always seem to baffle everyone else."

"I'm sorry, Joe. I'm not quite sure — "

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"I have always understood that I am the most important person there is, on the Earth or any other world within our reach. And I have always been willing to do or say anything that helps my climb to the summit."

"But how can you be that special? Since that's my place to be!"

Li laughed, and his assistants heartily joined in.

Again, Joe made a pistol with his hand, pointing his index finger at the candidate's face.

"You are a scary individual," Li remarked. Then he tried to wave the man back, looking at no one when he said, "Perhaps a medical need needs to be diagnosed. A little vacation for our dear friend, perhaps."

Hussein gave an agreeable nod.

In the distance, a single soft pop could be heard.

Joe slipped back to his seat.

His security man was sitting beside him. Bothered as well as curious, he asked, "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," said Joe. "Never mind."

Another mild pop was followed by something a little louder, a little nearer.

Just in case, the security man reached for his weapon. But he discovered that his holster was empty now.

Somehow his gun had found its way into Joe's hand.

"Stay close to me," Joe said.

"You know I will," the man muttered weakly.

Then came the flash of a thumb-nuke, followed by the sharp wail of people screaming, begging with Fortune to please show mercy, to please save their glorious, important lives.

V. World's End

THREE TERMS as President finally ended with an assortment of scandals — little crimes and large ones, plus a series of convenient nondisclosures — and those troubles were followed by the sudden announcement that Joseph Carroway would slide gracefully into retirement. After all that, there was persistent talk about major investigations and unsealing ancient records. Tired allegations refused to die. Could the one-time

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leader of humanity be guilty of even one tenth of the crimes that he was rumored to have committed? In judicial circles, wise minds discussed the prospects of charging and convicting the Old Man on the most egregious insults to common morality. Politicians screamed for justice without quite defining what justice required. Certain species were loudest in their complaints, but that was to be expected.

What was more surprising, perhaps, were the numbers of pure *sapiens* who blamed the President for every kind of ill. But most of the pain and passion fell on one-time colleagues and allies. Unable to sleep easily, they would sit at home, secretly considering their own complicities in old struggles and more recent deeds, as well as non-deeds and omissions that seemed brilliant at the moment, but now, in different light, looked rather ominous.

In the end, nothing substantial happened.

In the end, the Carroway Magic continued to hold sway.

His successor was a talented and noble soul. No one doubted her passion for peace or the decency of her instincts. And she was the one citizen of the Inhabited Worlds who could sit at a desk and sign one piece of parchment, forgiving crimes and transgressions and mistakes and misjudgments. And then she showed her feline face to the cameras, winning over public opinion by pointing out that trials would take decades, verdicts would be contested for centuries, and every last one of the defendants had been elected and then served every citizen with true skill.

The new president served one six-year term before leaving public life.

Joseph Carroway entered the next race at the last moment, and he won with a staggering seventy percent mandate. But by then the Old Man was exactly that: A slowed, sorry image of his original self, dependent on a talented staff and the natural momentum of a government that achieved the ordinary without fuss or too much controversy.

Fifteen months into Joe's final term, an alien starship entered the solar system. In physical terms, it was a modest machine: Twenty cubic kilometers of metal and diamond wrapped around empty spaces. There seemed to be no crew or pilot. Nor was there a voice offering to explain itself. But its course was clear from the beginning. Moving at nearly one percent of light speed, the Stranger, as it had been dubbed, missed the

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moon by a few thousand kilometers. Scientists and every telescope studied its configuration, and two nukes were set off in its vicinity — neither close enough to cause damage, it was hoped, but both producing EM pulses that helped create a detailed portrait of what lay inside. Working separately, teams of AI savants found the same awful hypothesis, and a single Antfolk nest dedicated to the most exotic physics proved that hypothesis to everyone's grim satisfaction. By then, the Stranger was passing through the sun's corona, its hull red-hot and its interior awakening. What might have been a hundred thousand year sleep was coming to an end. In less than a minute, this very unwelcome guest had vanished, leaving behind a cloud of ions and a tiny flare that normally would trouble no one, much less spell doom for humankind.

They told Joe what would happen.

His science advisor spoke first, and when there was no obvious reaction on that perpetually calm face, two assistants threw their interpretations of these events at the Old Man. Again, nothing happened. Was he losing his grip finally? This creature who had endured and survived every kind of disaster — was he suddenly lost, at wit's end and such?

But no, he was just letting his elderly mind assemble the puzzle that they had given him.

"How much time?" he asked.

"Ten, maybe twelve minutes," the science advisor claimed. "And then another eight minutes before the radiation and scorching heat reach us."

Others were hoping for a longer delay. As if twenty or thirty minutes would offer some kind of help.

Joe looked out the window, and with a wry smile pointed out, "It is a beautiful day."

In other words, the sun was up, and they were dead.

"How far will the damage extend?" he asked.

Nobody replied.

The Antfolk ambassador was watching from her orbital embassy, tied directly into the President's office. For a multitude of reasons, she despised this *sapien*. But he was the ruler of the Great Nest, and in awful

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times, she was willing to do or say anything to help him, even if that meant telling him the full, undiluted truth.

"Our small worlds will be vaporized. The big asteroids will melt and seal in the deepest parts of our nests." With a sad gesture of every hand, she added, "Mars is worse off than Earth, what with the terraforming only begun. And soon there won't be any solid surfaces on the Jovian moons."

Joe turned back to his science advisor. "Will the Americas survive?"

"In places, maybe." The man was nearly sobbing. "The flares will finish before the sun rises, and even with the climate shifts and the ash falls, there's a fair chance that the atmosphere will remain breathable."

Joe nodded.

Quietly, firmly, he told everyone, "I want an open line to every world. In thirty seconds."

Before anyone could react, the youngest assistant screamed out, "Why? Why would aliens do this awful thing to us?"

Joe laughed, just for a moment.

Then with a grandfatherly voice, he said, "Because they can. That's why."

"It has been an honor to serve as your President," Joe told an audience of two and then three and then four billion. But most citizens were too busy to watch this unplanned speech — an important element in his gruesome calculations. "But my days are done. The sun has been infiltrated, its hydrogen stolen to use in the manufacture of an amazing bomb, and virtually everybody in the range of my voice will be dead by tomorrow.

"If you are listening to me, listen carefully.

"The only way you will survive in the coming hell is to find those very few people whom you trust most. Do it now. Get to your families, hold hands with your lovers. Whoever you believe will watch your back always. And then you need to search out those who aren't aware of what I am telling you to do.

"Kill those other people.

"Whatever they have of value, take it.

"And store their corpses, if you can. In another week or two, you might relish the extra protein and fat."

He paused, just for a moment.

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Then Joe said, "For the next ten generations, you will need to think only about yourselves. Be selfish. Be vicious. Be strong, and do not forget:

"Kindness is a luxury.

"Empathy will be a crippling weakness.

"But in another fifty generations, we can rebuild everything that we have lost here today. I believe that, my friends. Goodness can come again. Decency can flower in any rubble. And in fifty more generations after that, we will reach out to the stars together.

"Keep that thought close tonight, and always.

"One day, we will punish the bastards who did this awful thing to us. But to make that happen, a few of you must find the means to survive!"

"You're just lucky I'm being abducted by aliens, pal!"

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Kevin Haw contributed "Requirements for the Mythology Merit Badge" to our Sept. 2007 issue. He lives in Southern California and recently moved his electronic digs to http://KevinHaw.com. *He is a computer programmer by trade and currently works in the aerospace industry. He says he has turned down job offers from video game makers, including one from the good folks at Blizzard Entertainment, and it's probably a good thing for us all that he did, if this tale is any indication...*

Render unto Caesar

By Kevin N. Haw

Booming virtual economies in online worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft have drawn the attention of a U.S. congressional committee, which is investigating how virtual assets and incomes should be taxed.

— Adam Pasick, reporting from the Reuter's Second Life bureau, October 15, 2006.

WILLHELMIA BLOODFANG Elfbane, Grand Warrior Duchess of the Troll Army, Defender of the Defiled Realms, Scourge of All Fair Creatures, shifted her seven-foot frame nervously in the too-small chair as the Tiny Man decided her fate.

"You were saying, Ms. Elfbane?" the Tiny Man prompted. He didn't look up from the thick sheaf of papers spread across the surface of his battered, government-issue metal desk.

"Er, ah, yes," Willhelmia said, her voice raspy against the quiet office

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noises that were the only sound in the harshly lit gray cubicle. "So I normally wait for the Meaties — "

"'Meaties'? The human subscribers of the Game?"

"Yes. They, the knights and good wizards and that ilk, they climb Doom Mountain and face off with me. They come at me and smash and fight and, er, stuff."

"And then?"

"Well, if they kill me, they complete the Troll Queen Quest — Hey! Doesn't that — "

"No, Ms. Elfbane," the Tiny Man replied as he continued to scour Willhelmia's file. "Virtual Death does not absolve taxpayers of their obligations."

"Oh."

"These subscribers, though, they pay for the privilege of logging in and fighting you in the Game?"

"Um, sure. Me and lots of other monsters."

"Well," the Tiny Man nodded, closing the folder with a note of finality. "You generate revenue. That makes you an employee."

"But that means — "

"Yes, you're subject to withholding."

"But, that's crazy! I don't even get paid!"

"Really? What happens to all the equipment of the heroes you defeat?"

"Well, er, I put it into my treasure horde."

"So you work on commission."

"But it's virtual property. It only exists inside the Game!"

"But it can be sold or auctioned on any number of Internet sites to other human players. That makes it income — taxable income." The Tiny Man paused for a moment, a frown creeping over his sallow face as he scratched his bald pate. "You know, if there're fluctuations in value, you might be subject to Capital Gains as well. Hmmm...."

"But, but...I'm *Virtual*!"

"Ms. Elfbane, if you feel you're being singled out because of your minority status, I can assure you — "

"No, it's just I just can't understand how you people think I owe $1673 — "

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"It's $1724 with interest and the fine."

"But I don't *have* that kind of money!"

"With all due respect, I've heard *that* before." The Tiny Man snorted. "And before you start telling me about how you didn't know you were subject to income tax or you didn't think the IRS had jurisdiction in virtual worlds or any of those other excuses, I'll remind you that I've heard all of those as well. You're not the first Digital American I've audited, Ms. Elfbane."

The trolless, whose interactions with humans were normally limited to screamed obscenities and mutual attempts at decapitation, found herself gnashing her fangs and reflexively reaching to the hip of her armored skirt. Alas, instead of finding the comforting weight of her favorite axe, the empty space brought back the humiliating memory of how the pudgy, glassy-eyed security guard in the lobby had confiscated the weapon. Not that killing one little Tiny Man would have helped, of course. From what she'd heard, this whole "Death and Taxes" thing had been going on for a lot longer and was invented by people much more devious than she could even fathom.

She was out of her depth, she realized as she wiped the corner of her eye with a claw. But even as she tried to control her breathing, to count to ten as she had been advised to do before disemboweling anyone out in the Nondigital World, she felt frustrated tears streaming down the green scales of her face. Realizing it was no use, Willhelmia buried her face in her hands.

It just wasn't *fair!*

There was an awkward moment, the only noise disturbing the suddenly silent office being her gravelly sobs and the rhythmic "clang!" of her mailed fist smashing the steel plates of her skirt in frustration. Then, she saw movement in the corner of her eye and realized that the Tiny Man had left his perch behind his desk to offer a box of tissues. She accepted one and blew her nose with an echoing moose call that set the overhead fluorescent fixture swaying.

"Thanks," she whispered as faint half shadows rocked across the office.

"It's okay." The Tiny Man nodded quietly, standing on his toes to place a companionable hand on the spiked bronze plate covering the

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seated Willhelmia's shoulder. "I understand. After all, we here at the IRS are not without sympathy...."

She nodded, dabbing at her tears with the tissue as she stared down at the Tiny Man's loafers.

"...and I don't see any reason why we can't allow you to work off this debt — "

The words caused Willhelmia to snap her head up in surprise. He couldn't *possibly* mean....

A look at the Tiny Man's face, though, dashed that idea as she saw not the leer she'd been expecting (hoping for?) but instead the practiced, serious expression of a salesman making a pitch. Nevertheless, Willhelmia realized as she crumpled the tissue, if the Tiny Man had a way to square her debt with the IRS, it was worth considering.

"What," the trolless asked with a wistful sigh that went completely unnoticed by the bureaucrat, "did you have in mind?"

"Well, Ms. Elfbane, it's a special project from the Commissioner himself. You said you commanded an entire troll *army*, is that correct?"

The Internal Revenue Service recently began outsourcing debt-collection activities to more aggressively pursue people who owe taxes. The IRS has already turned over to private agencies the names of more than 13,725 taxpayers who owe the government about $73.5 million....

—Tom Herman, *The Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2006 (paraphrased). ☙

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Tim Sullivan has published seven novels and more than thirty science fiction stories, edited two anthologies, and recently finished a historical novel. He's written, acted in, and directed a number of direct-to-video feature films. Sullivan lives in Miami with his companion, Fiona Kelleghan, where he's patiently awaiting the submersion of the entire metropolitan area while amusing himself by strumming an acoustic guitar. He'd rather not mention his cats.

The Nocturnal Adventure of Dr. O and Mr. D

By Tim Sullivan

"YOU'RE AN ECLECTICIST, Doctor," said Mr. D, scratching his salt-and-pepper beard as he leaned over the old typewriter on his battered desk.

"And an electricist, as well," said Dr. O, looking down his nose and speaking in a mocking tone.

Mr. D didn't mind. "True, you can't play rock and roll without electricity, can you?"

"No, I'd have to play skiffle."

Mr. D laughed. Ever since he'd come to Dr. O's house, he'd been laughing a lot. Doctor O was good company. But Mr. D wasn't getting much work done and he was getting a little bored hanging around the house.

"I'd like to have a sailboat," he said.

"Get away from it all?" said the Doctor, chewing gum. "But a sailboat's a lot of work, isn't it? Polishing the teak, trimming the sails, tossing out the bilge, and all the rest?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

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"Better to sit here and dream about sailing," said Dr. O. "No work to be done, and you can go even farther away if you want."

"To a distant star?"

"Across the universe, Admiral." Dr. O winked in exaggerated fashion.

"The best of both worlds." Mr. D swiveled in his chair and looked out the window. "It's very foggy."

"Inside and out."

Mr. D stared at the white tendrils climbing up the window pane. They left drops of moisture that trembled briefly and burst, only to run back down the glass surface like so many tears.

"Mind if I smoke?" Dr. O asked.

"No."

Mr. D heard, rather than saw, the match head erupt in flame. He smelled the acrid sulfur, mingling a moment later with the tobacco smoke odor. He coughed. "On second thought, I'm trying to quit. Put it out, will you?"

"All right." Dr. O's thin, graceful hand stubbed the cigarette out in an ashtray on the desk. "I'd step out to smoke, but the fog's too thick. My hair would be soaked."

"Put on a hat."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" Dr. O demanded in exaggerated Merseyside accents. "You, safe and warm in here, playing the ocarina or whatever 'tis you're planning to do, while I step out in me hat, all gangly and stupid with me ciggy, to catch me death."

Mr. D said, laughing, "That's what I'd like, yes."

"I know when I'm not wanted," Dr. O said with melodramatic flair. "I'll take me business elsewhere and leave you to your fog."

He turned as if to leave the room.

"No, don't go," said Mr. D. "I'm stuck, and I want you to talk to me until I can get moving again."

"So it's your colonic business we're about, is it, Phil? A fat lot of good that'll do the two of us, me stopping by and you stopped up."

Mr. D laughed. "No, I mean I'm stuck on the page I've been typing."

"Oh, you're a sly old fox, Phil," said Dr. O, "with your beard and your puppy eyes, like a military man with your filthy commands. Don't smoke.

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Don't go. Don't shout. Don't even fart. What kind of a life is that for a rock and roll man?"

Dr. O sat down in the only other chair in the room and picked up a small practice guitar he always brought with him when he came to Mr. D's office. He began to strum, playing major, minor, and dreamlike major seventh chords as he sang in a sweet, high voice, "You tell me what I can't do, and I say what else is new, so I've got something to say to you-oo-oo, I don't care if it makes you blue, and I hope it will be enough, even if it's just a bit rough — Go get stuffed."

The last three words were delivered in a gut-bucket rasp. Somehow Dr. O had gone from a child to a world-weary blues singer in half a dozen improvised lines. His invention delighted Mr. D. "I wish I could do that, Winston."

"I wish I could do what you do, Philip," said Dr. O.

"You've published."

"Only because I was famous. Five years after those books came out, nobody was reading them. Maybe nobody read them when they were new."

"Sure they did," Mr. D said. "I read them. They're quite witty."

"Do you really think so?"

"Would I say such a thing if it wasn't true?"

Dr. O stopped playing his practice guitar and looked hard at Mr. D. He thought about the question for a moment, and wondered if he were being mocked. "You might," he said, "if you think I'm insecure."

Mr. D became thoughtful. "You're right. I could do that, but I didn't."

"You enjoyed me poems and stories and drawings, then?"

"Yes."

Dr. O put the guitar down on the carpet, its neck leaning against the chair. "Let's go for a walk, Phil."

"Out in the fog?"

"Yes, we'll get lost. It'll be grand."

Mr. D considered the possibility. A walk might kick start his imagination. "All right. Let me get a jacket."

Dr. O stood, buttoning up the same long, black coat he'd had on when he arrived. "Got any hats?"

"No, I don't wear them."

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"I do, but I'd rather not go back up to my room just now. Let's go bareheaded."

"That was my plan all along."

Dr. O laughed. "And what a sinister plan it is, Mr. D."

Mr. D selected a short leather jacket and put it on. His belly protruded a bit, and he zipped up around it with some effort. "How do you stay so trim, Winston?"

"I don't eat."

"Of course." They went through the office door and down a hallway to the back door.

"Age before beauty." Dr. O opened the door for Mr. D and they went outside.

"Now I'll have a fag," said Dr. O. His gaunt face was distorted in the match light through the fog.

Mr. D turned to shut the back door, and a cat slipped out before he could manage it. "Vishnu got away," he said.

"Fine. Maybe he'll catch a rat."

"I was hoping he'd be our guide to the spirit world."

"We might need one," said Dr. O, glancing about. Except for the diffused light from a street lamp, nothing was visible in any direction. Even when one looked up, all that could be seen was mist disappearing into the night.

"It's like standing on a cloud," said Mr. D.

"We're standing *inside* a cloud," Dr. O corrected him, "a low-hanging cloud that couldn't find the energy to climb up into the sky."

Mr. D shrugged. "I don't think that's accurate, Winston."

"Meteorological fol-de-rol, no doubt," said Dr. O, puffing on his cigarette to show a red glow in the fog.

They started to walk away from the house. "We'll be lost in no time," Mr. D said.

"Yes, but then we'll find ourselves again and start over."

Vishnu, a short-haired white and gray cat, rubbed against Dr. D's ankles. "He's not going to lead the way?"

"He'll do as he pleases, like all cats."

"Yes, but I thought we might follow him, just to see where he takes us."

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"He'll lead us to rats."

"I'm not sure there are any rats out tonight."

Indeed, it seemed that nothing at all was out tonight. The street was so quiet that Dr. O's voice was startling when he spoke in the damp stillness. "Let's go this way."

They set out along the pavement, seeing no traffic, no pedestrians — nothing other than Vishnu.

Their footsteps fell with uncanny loudness on the macadam. At last Dr. O got rid of his cigarette, flicking it out of sight. "Seven minutes," he said.

"What's seven minutes?" Mr. D asked.

"That's how long we've been walking, more or less," said Dr. O. "It takes about seven minutes to polish off a fag."

"Oh. It seems like we've been out longer."

"That's because we're in Limbo."

"No, Limbo was abolished."

"Was it? What will they do with all those babies?"

"I don't know, Winston. Relocate them to heaven, I guess."

"A fine how-do-you-do that is. A thousand years or so of mucking about with Plato and Aristotle in a giant nursery, and now they've got to go join all the goody-two-shoes in heaven?"

"Not much of a deal for unbaptized babies, is it?"

"Not much of a deal for us if we get lost out here, Mr. D."

Dr. O had a point. They'd been walking for some time, not really paying attention to where they were going. Mr. D couldn't remember if they'd even crossed a street yet. Had they made any turns?

"When the sun comes up, they'll find our bleached bones in front of a shopping mall," Dr. O said. "A grim fate for two kindred spirits."

"Yes, we are two of a kind, aren't we?"

"Three of a kind, if you ask me." Dr. O pulled a packet of gum from an inside coat pocket and offered a stick to Mr. D.

"Thanks," Mr. D said, accepting the gum. He unraveled the silvery paper and stuffed the gum in his mouth.

"It's sugarless," said Dr. O. "Good for your teeth."

"There's not much hope for my teeth, Winston."

"There's not much hope for my Winstons," said Dr. O, checking his crumpled cigarette pack. "I've only got three more."

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"There's a gas station down this way, I think," said Mr. D. "You can get a pack there."

They turned down a quiet street, as if drifting into a snow bank that parted before them. The cat was still with them.

Dr. O popped another stick of gum into his mouth and chewed vigorously.

The fog seemed to be thickening and the haze of street lamps was barely visible. It had been a long time since Mr. D had seen fog like this. If he hadn't felt his feet touching the ground, he could easily believe that he was floating in space, walking on a cloud.

"I can't see my shoes," Dr. O said. "And it's not because I'm too fat. Look."

Mr. D looked. His shoes were gone, too, buried under the rolling fog. "It's swallowing us up."

"Good, I haven't been swallowed up in some time. It's a wonderful feeling."

Mr. D felt as if the world were constricting around them, a nebulous, moist planet that would devour them. He enjoyed the feeling.

"Soon there'll just be the two of us," said Dr. O, "and all the rest will be gone."

"And then one of us will vanish, and the other will be alone."

Dr. O dropped to his knees with a popping of his joints. He wrung his hands. In a Jolsonesque voice, he cried, "What'll happen to us, then, sonny boy? Will you be in one world while I'm in another?"

Mr. D mulled over the question. "Yes, I think so. But that's the way it's always been, Winston."

"Always alone?" Dr. O rose, his skinny legs surprisingly agile as he jumped up. He raised a sly eyebrow. "Even when we're with women?"

"Even then."

"No matter how much we wish we were part of some larger group?"

"It seems that way."

"Bollocks."

"Maybe so. Who can say for sure?"

"I can say for sure that I'm part of the human community."

"Aren't you isolated by all your wealth and privilege?"

"Somewhat, but I'm still a human, and I care about other humans."

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"Is that all it takes?"

"It's a start, isn't it, Mr. D?"

"I guess so."

They walked a little faster, as if changing their location could change the subject. Dr. O lit another cigarette. A dark shape loomed in the fog.

"Is it moving?" Dr. O asked.

"I don't think so. Maybe it's lying in wait."

"It could be a giant."

But as they drew closer to it, they saw that it was only a house. "It's me neighbor," said Dr. O. "Babblington Q. Flab, Esquire. Deals in rubber goods."

Mr. D laughed. His sense of humor wasn't like Dr. O's, but he found his friend's whimsically snide comments amusing, nevertheless.

"Shall we pop in for a late night visit?" Dr. O said.

"Do you think that would be all right?" Mr. D asked.

"There's a light on."

Indeed, a fuzzy yellow square came into sight overhead as they rounded the building. "I wonder if someone is writing up there," Mr. D said.

"Another kindred spirit, no doubt," said Dr. O, finding a wrought iron gate and swinging it inward; it responded with an elephantine groan.

They went up the walk and found a bell. Dr. O pressed it. There was no immediate answer.

"Come on," said Dr. O. "We know you're in there."

"Maybe we should go," said Mr. D.

And they were about to do just that when a distorted voice came out of an intercom box below the bell. "Who is it?"

"It's your old mate and neighbor," said Dr. O, "come to borrow a cup of sugar."

A pause. "Winston?"

"The very same."

"Come on in."

A buzzer sounded and Mr. D grabbed the door handle. They went inside. Faint amber lighting showed a stairway in front of them. A door squeaked open upstairs and footsteps sounded. The fattest woman Mr. D had ever seen came to the top of the stairs.

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"You brought a friend?" she asked.

"Yes, this is Mr. D. Mr. D, this is Doris."

"Hi, Mr. D. Well, come on up. I'm not going down there. I don't want to trip on those stairs."

Mr. D followed Dr. O as he climbed up to the second floor. Before they got to the top, Doris turned and walked away.

"Where's she going?" Mr. D asked, noting the great number of doors at the top of the stairs. There seemed to be dozens of them.

"Don't worry, mate. I know the way."

"That's a relief."

Mr. D soon saw that there was no trick to finding where Doris had gone. The open door cast a long rectangle of light across the bare wooden hallway floor. They went into the open room.

"I'm glad you showed up, because I'm bored," Doris said.

"As long as I don't bore you because I showed up," Dr. O replied.

"Oh, no. You're the most entertaining person I've ever known." Doris wore a housecoat that spread out about her like a pink waterfall as she sat on the edge of an enormous bed in a big, messy room. The bedspread was pink, too; in the dim light, she seemed to become part of the bed, with only her hands, head, and feet showing. "How did this reprobate get you to come out in such a fog, Mr. D?"

"Oh, I'm a night owl, too," Mr. D said. "I stay up late working."

"Me, too."

"What kind of work do you do?" Mr. D asked.

"I'm an artist."

"Really? Paint? Sculpture?"

"I've tried those, and just about everything else."

"Oh." Mr. D waited for her to tell him more.

"Winston," she said, "don't drop ashes on the floor."

"All right, mum." Dr. O found a standing ashtray among the clutter and flicked the ash from his smoke.

Mr. D noticed that the bed appeared to be an antique, perhaps three centuries old. It looked like something Marie Antoinette might have slept on, complete with an enormous, ornate headboard. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the mattress and pillows were stuffed with goose feathers.

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"Have a seat if you can find one," said Doris.

Mr. D, sedentary by nature, accepted the invitation. He picked up some books and papers from a wing chair, placed them carefully on the floor, and sat down. Dr. O paced, making his way through stacks of papers higher than his head, chewing gum and smoking, as usual. At times he disappeared behind the stacks, and then reappeared elsewhere. Occasionally, he reached up and took something off the top of a stack to look at and put it back after thirty- or forty-second perusals. Sometimes he said "ahem" as he did this.

"Lovely," said Dr. O, after looking at one such paper. He didn't put this one back, nor did he take his eyes off it.

"Thank you," Doris said.

"You've done all this since I was last here?"

"Yes, and more. You know all these rooms are filled with my work."

"Yeah, I know."

"May I see it?" Mr. D asked.

"Sure."

Mr. D got up and went to see what Dr. O was looking at. It was a crude drawing of a bird. He stared at in puzzlement.

"So, what do you think?" Doris asked.

"Uh, pleasant."

She laughed. "Thanks. You're a nice guy."

"Tell that to my exes," Mr. D said, hoping to change the subject.

"How many you got?"

"Five."

"Want another one?"

Mr. D glanced at her, hoping she was joking. The grin on her round, pleasant face told him that she was. He ventured a chuckle. "I think I've had too many already."

"You got kids?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Girls?"

"A couple," Mr. D said. "You?"

"Oh, I've got a lot of kids, Mr. D, and a lot of grandchildren, too."

"Great."

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"Our kids are all we leave when we go," said Dr. O, in a rare moment of somberness.

"Well, I don't know about that, Winston."

"What else, then?"

"We leave our work."

"But we don't leave our play?" Dr. O said, brightening.

"You're always so full of fun, Winston," said Doris.

"Only because I have a short attention span," Dr. O replied, putting the drawing back on the high stack.

Mr. D felt something touching his ankles. For a moment it frightened him, but then he looked down to see that it was Vishnu the cat.

"So you didn't get lost after all," he said, bending to stroke the cat's ears.

"Vishnu never gets lost," said Dr. O. "He's a god, you see."

"The Preserver in Hinduism," Mr. D added.

"Right. I had a friend who was into all that."

Vishnu lay on his side with his head up, his ears moving about as Mr. D scratched them. "He's a friendly guy."

Suddenly Vishnu jabbed with his left paw and scratched Mr. D on the back of his hand.

"Not always so friendly," Dr. O observed.

In the dim light, Mr. D watched a bead of blood form on his hand. He sucked on the tiny wound to clean it.

"Auto-vampirism," said Dr. O. "It's all the rage these days." He bent down and picked up the cat, draping Vishnu around his shoulders like a mink stole. "Shame on you, you naughty beast. Mr. D isn't a mouse, you know."

"He was just playing," said Doris.

"Cats are like roses," said Mr. D. "They're beautiful, but they have thorns."

"How poetic," Doris said.

"He's a writer," said Dr. O. "That's why I envy him."

"How *in*-te-*rest*ing," said Doris. "I wish I had writing talent."

"Have you ever tried it?" Mr. D asked.

"Oh, yes, I've tried just about everything creative you could think of, even macramé."

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"Macramé?"

"Yes, like this." She pointed to a planter knit from yarn, hanging by a metal hook from the ceiling. A fern's spidery fronds embraced the planter and its shadow in the corner of the room.

"Very nice."

"Thank you, Mr. D."

"How does it keep the moisture in?" Mr. D asked, moving closer to the planter.

"A basket under the macramé."

"Oh."

"There's more here than meets the eye," Dr. O said with melodramatic flair. "Very suspicious. Very suspicious indeed."

"You forgot to harrumph," said Mr. D.

"Harrumph," responded Dr. O.

"You two could be a comedy team," Doris said.

"Oh, Dr. O," sang Mr. D, remembering a comedy routine he'd seen when he was a kid, "Oh, Dr. O, do you know why I'm going to Egypt, Dr. O?"

"Why *are* you going to Egypt, Mr. D?"

"Because up and down the Nile, the girls wear nothing but a smile, and that is why I am going to Egypt, Dr. O."

Doris howled with laughter.

"Music hall?" enquired Dr. O.

"Vaudeville." Mr. D said. "Gallagher and Shean."

"*So* funny!" Doris said, between fits of laughter. "So, *so* funny."

"So-so?" Dr. O said, looking down his nose at her. "I thought 'twas better than that."

"Oh, Winston!" Doris cried with delight.

"I'll defend this woman's honor," Dr. O said, cupping one side of his mouth with his hand. "Which is more than she ever did."

"Too much!" Doris roared. "Too, too much!"

Mr. D laughed at the way she was laughing, and Dr. O laughed at Mr. D's laughter. They laughed until they hurt, and then laughed some more, snorting and wheezing at the sheer absurdity of their laughter.

Vishnu meowed.

"He wants something to eat," Dr. O said, "the feline pest."

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"I've got something for him," Doris said. She got off the bed and went to a tiny refrigerator nearly hidden behind an exercise bicycle whose seat was piled high with papers and yellowing magazines. She took out a bowl and set it on the floor.

Vishnu needed no invitation. He sprang from Dr. O's shoulder and made his way quickly to the bowl.

"Is it human flesh?" Dr. O inquired mildly.

"Better than that, liverwurst."

Dr. O knelt beside the cat as Vishnu bolted his food. "A nice paté for you, my pet?"

Vishnu paid no attention to him as he ate the liverwurst.

Dr. O rose and sucked on his cigarette. "What shall we do now, children?"

"Wait for the sun to come up," Mr. D suggested.

"And then drink the dew?" Dr. O asked.

"We could go out and pick flowers," said Doris.

"Good idea," said Mr. D. "How long before dawn?"

"I'm not wearing a watch," said Dr. O.

"The fog will lift when the sun comes up," Doris said.

"Yes, and then we'll gambol about like carefree children," Dr. O said.

"With flowers in our hair," Doris said, grinning.

"I haven't got enough hair to put them in," Mr. D said.

"Then clench one between your teeth," Dr. O said, "like a señorita from Barcelona."

"I want to do that!" Doris said, clapping her pudgy hands.

"Then you shall, Doña Doris, you shall."

Even without the imaginary flower held between her teeth, Doris began to twirl in a pretty fair approximation of a flamenco dancer.

Dr. O and Mr. D applauded and shouted, "*Olé!*"

Laughing, Doris collapsed back onto the sanctuary of her pink bedspread. It took a moment for her to get her breath, and then she frowned and said, "I should have offered you something to drink."

"Oh, we're fine," said Mr. D.

"No, really. I'm not being a very good hostess."

"May we help ourselves to the contents of your larder?" Dr. O said, smiling wickedly.

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"Sure, in the fridge where I got the cat food."

"What potables shall we find there?" Dr. O wondered aloud as he stooped and looked into the fridge. "Demon rum, perhaps?"

As Dr. O rummaged, Mr. D looked up at an unlit chandelier hanging overhead. "That's really impressive."

"Tiffany glass," Doris said.

"Really."

"No, not really." Doris giggled.

Mr. D laughed. "You're a fabulist, Doris."

"I fantasize to pass the time," she said.

"I do that, too."

"What else do we have but time to daydream?"

"Or nightdream, as the case may be," said Dr. O, whirling about dramatically with three green bottles clutched in his long fingers.

"Here you are, my dear," he said, handing one to Doris. "You must be exhausted after that lovely dance."

"Thank you, Winston," Doris said, accepting the bottle.

Dr. O bowed and turned to hand another bottle to Mr. D.

"It's beer," Mr. D said, looking at the bottle. "I thought it was ginger ale."

"Don't you drink?" Doris asked.

"Once in a while." Mr. D unscrewed the cap and took a swig. It went down well. He'd been walking and talking for quite a while without anything to drink.

Doris sipped her beer delicately, while Dr. O paced the floor holding his bottle as if it were a baby bird, threading his way between the stacks. Vishnu followed him for a while and then sprawled on some loose papers to take a nap. Dr. O lit his last cigarette off the ember of the previous one, and dropped the smoldering butt and the crumpled pack into the ashtray.

"It's nice to have friends over," Doris said.

"It's nice of you to have us," Mr. D said, wondering how Doris could call someone a friend after knowing him for only a few minutes. But when he thought about it, he wanted to be her friend.

"Doris is like us," Dr. O said.

"Oh?"

"She's dead, too."

"I am not," Doris said, disturbed.

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"Sure you are, Dorie," Dr. O said. "We're all dead."

"That's not true." Doris's eyes reddened.

"Dr. O, come on," said Mr. D. "Don't kid her like that."

Dr. O lifted a hand as if to ward away evil spirits. "Phil, you're so wrapped up in mysticism you can't see it either, but it's true. We're all dead."

"Don't be morbid."

"I was gunned down by a madman outside my home."

"They say you never know it's coming," Mr. D said. "You don't know you've been shot."

"They're wrong." Dr. O thought about it for a moment. "Maybe it's that way if you get shot in the head, but I lived for a few minutes."

"Oh, God! Stop it!" Doris screamed.

"All right, Doris," Dr. O said, seeing that he had badly upset her. "Please don't cry."

"Winston, you're too honest for your own good," said Mr. D.

"Except when I lie to meself." He looked down at Doris, who lay sobbing on the pink bedspread, staining a pillow with her tears. "I'm sorry, love."

"No," Doris sniffed and sat up. "You're right. I died from heart failure."

"And you, Phil?"

"I had a vision," said Mr. D. "There was another world, a pink beam of light that came from a distant star."

"Across the universe...."

"Yes, across the universe. The beam gave me power, but the last time it came I ended up here."

"And where the fuck is here?" Dr. O asked.

"I don't know," said Mr. D. "There are theories physicists have come up with, or at least hypotheses, that may explain it."

"This isn't science fiction, Phil."

"Isn't it?"

Dr. O took a mouthful of beer. "Well, maybe 'tis."

"M-Theory says there may be universes overlapping, infinite strings connecting them through an eternal network."

"It sounds like magic," Doris said.

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The two men looked at her. Mr. D thought she was beautiful at that moment. She'd stopped crying, but her eyes were still moist and reflective, full of wonder and curiosity. "Yes," he said, "like magic."

"Science, magic. It's all bollocks," Dr. O said. "We're here now, in Hell or Heaven, and heaven knows where the hell we are, and what difference does it make?"

"I don't know," Mr. D said. "Maybe none, but aren't you curious about it, Winston?"

Dr. O looked away, chewing his gum thoughtfully. "Yeah, I am. I'm just afraid it will never end."

"You want it to end?"

Dr. O chewed some more. "Not really. I don't know what I want. I guess I want it all to make sense."

"I don't know if there's any kind of sense to it, rationally speaking," Mr. D said. "Maybe it can only be understood religiously, as a matter of faith."

"Religion never did much for me," Dr. O said. "I stole money from the church poor box when I was a kid, to buy me fags and gum."

"You didn't!" Doris cried.

"You're right." Dr. O folded his hands as if in prayer. "I didn't."

"I thought it was all comprehensible, that it could be explained through science or philosophy," Mr. D said, "but after the first stroke, I knew I was wrong. I'd gained mental abilities I didn't have before."

Dr. O stared at him. "Bollocks! The stroke made you think that, but it can't be true."

"But it is. I was able to diagnose my son's illness. I found what the doctors had missed. And I found it because I knew something they didn't know."

"And what's that?"

Doris and Dr. O waited for his answer. Mr. D wanted to tell them what it was, but he couldn't. "I don't know."

"You don't know what they didn't know? So how did you diagnose your son's illness?"

"I can't remember. I just did."

"That's confusing," Doris said softly.

"It's bollocks, Phil, and you know it."

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"No, I don't. I don't know anything. The more I read and the more I write, the less I know. I never thought it was going to be like that."

"What did you think it would be like?" Dr. O asked, anger evident in his tone.

"I thought I'd learn to understand the meaning of it all."

"It all? What all?"

"This." Phil gestured about himself with a wide sweep on his right hand.

"My house?" Doris asked.

"Your house. Winston's house. The fog. The world. The galaxy. The way things are."

"Phil, you're still talking bollocks."

"You want to know the same things, Winston. Don't deny it."

Winston cast his eyes down. "You're right, and I'm a fucking hypocrite. What of it?"

"What of it? If we're dead, as you believe, we've moved on into another reality, another universe, or multiverse, or whatever you want to call it. I don't remember dying, but it could be that you're right. Maybe we really are dead."

"Why take my word for it?"

"Because I remember when you died."

"You do?" Winston said.

"Yes, it was a couple of years before I came here."

"The death of Dr. O'Boogie...."

"It was all over the news," Doris said. "It broke my heart."

"So it proves we're dead," Dr. O said, "and that's it."

"Maybe."

"Not maybe. There's nothing else."

"What about the people you love?" Doris asked. "Your memories?"

"I used to dwell on them. Me mum, and the missus, and the kids."

"You don't think about them anymore?" Mr. D asked.

"Of course I think about them!" Dr. O seemed angry enough to throw the bottle now. "But they're not here, are they? So what good is it?"

"Maybe they will be here some day," Doris offered.

"No, they won't," Dr. O said. "And do you know why?"

Doris remained silent.

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"Because this is Hell."

"Nor are we out of it," Mr. D said.

"No, you're both wrong," Doris said. "This isn't Hell."

"Let me guess," Dr. O said, narrowing his eyes at her. "You think it's Heaven."

"Oh, I don't know. I just try to make the best of it."

"That's not my way. I make the worst, not the best."

"That's not true. You make beautiful music, Winston."

"Most of it's shite," he said, dumping the papers from the exercise bicycle and folding his long legs as he sat down. "A few good things, but nothing much."

"You're fishing," Mr. D said. "You know everyone loves your music."

"Not everyone."

"Well, I certainly do," Doris said. "I was just the right age when I first heard you sing."

"We grew up together, eh, Dorie?"

"Very quickly."

Mr. D smiled. He understood Dr. O's rage, because he shared it in his own quiet way. He didn't express it as forcefully, but it was there just the same, all the time.

"Has the fog lifted?" Doris said.

"Does it ever lift?" Dr. O said.

"No, really. Is it still foggy outside? I can't tell from here."

Mr. D could see it hanging like a white sheet through the second story window. "It's still out there, Doris."

"I thought it would be. Dawn will burn it away, and then we can go out and pick flowers."

"We're back on the flowers again, are we?" Dr. O said. "Well, why not?"

"Admit it, Winston," said Doris, "you love beautiful things."

"Of course I do," he said, seeming genuinely surprised. "I'm as human as the next guy."

"Maybe even more so," said Mr. D.

"Whatever that means." Dr. O took a drag and exhaled the smoke with a deep sigh. He took the dwindling cigarette out of his mouth and looked at. "But you'd think I could quit smoking now that I've come to

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Heaven, or Hell, or wherever we are. Maybe in this universe smoking's not a bad habit."

"I think it could be beneficial in moderation, a relaxant," Mr. D said. "But you're like me, and you rarely do anything in moderation."

"I've an oral fixation, Dr. Freud," Dr. O said, leering. "Perhaps you prefer the anal sort?"

Mr. D shrugged. "I've never tried smoking through my ass, although I've talked through it often enough."

Doris put her hand over her mouth, demurely stifling laughter. "Mr. D, you're a humble man."

"Actually, I'm an egoist of the first order," he said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have persisted in writing all those books and stories."

"Did you get rich writing them?"

"No, other people made some money, but I mostly just got by."

"That's a shame."

"Oh, I don't know. I had my own place, people I loved and who loved me, and I did what I wanted to do."

"And then you died," Dr. O said.

"I guess so."

They were all quiet. "Want to watch TV?" Doris said after a while.

"TV in the afterlife? I'd rather hear some music," Mr. D said, "but I'm kind of picky about what I listen to."

"Be careful of the company you keep, Mr. D," said Dr. O. "The bastards can lower your standards if you don't watch out."

"Too late," said Mr. D.

"I bet you have marvelous taste," Doris said.

"Well, I like Winston's music."

"Thanks, Phil," said Dr. O. For once, no sarcasm was evident in his tone.

"I guess we've imposed on you long enough, Doris," Mr. D said, worried that Dr. O would continue to say things that upset her.

"Not at all."

"I think we should shove off, don't you, Winston?"

"Shove something."

"You don't have to go, do you?" There was a note of desperation in Doris's voice.

"I guess we could stay a little longer," Mr. D said, weakening.

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"Bollocks," Dr. O said, smoking his last cigarette down to the filter tip. He rose and dropped it into the metal ashtray. "It's time to go."

"You'll come back, though?"

"Of course we will, Dorie."

"But you hadn't been over in such a long time."

"I'm sorry."

"Please don't be a stranger, Winston. You too, Mr. D. You're welcome any time."

"Thank you," Mr. D said.

"We can find our own way out," Dr. O said. He leaned down and tenderly kissed Doris on the cheek. "Good night, my darling."

"Good night," Doris said in a tiny voice.

The two men went out the door and down the stairs, back out into the fog, which seemed thicker than ever.

"She's lonely," said Mr. D.

"Aren't we all?" Dr. O pulled his collar up to keep out the damp.

Mr. D didn't answer. He enjoyed feeling pinpoints of moisture breaking on his face. "It's almost like rain," he said.

"You're walking in a cloud," Dr. O reminded him.

"That's what my first wife said about me."

"She thought you were a dreamer?"

"I almost gave up my life's work because of her. She thought I'd never make enough money writing."

"But she was wrong?"

"No, she was right. That's why we got divorced."

They both laughed.

"You've got to love a bird who looks out for her own interests," Dr. O said.

"Oh, she definitely did that," Mr. D agreed. "But it was harder for a woman to have a career in those days. She was dependent on my income."

"Sure."

Something small and dark darted ahead of them and into the fog. Vishnu.

"If what you were saying is true, Mr. D — about the universe and all that — why are we stuck here?"

"I don't know...maybe we're not stuck at all."

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"Well, we've been here quite a while."

"Yes, but we were on Earth for a while, too. Or another Earth than this one, at any rate."

Dr. O laughed. "You must have been fun to do drugs with."

"My friends and I had some good times."

"Bit of a giggle, right?"

"Right."

"Should we go back to the house?"

Mr. D thought about it for a moment. "No, I think we should keep going."

"We'll follow Vishnu."

"I can't see him."

"Neither can I, but he'll turn up again."

The pavement was firm beneath their feet, and they went on. Mr. D wondered why they hadn't turned back. He, for one, wasn't the outdoorsy type, and neither was Dr. O. Somewhere behind them was Dr. O's comfortable house. Ahead of them was nothing but fog. Perhaps it wasn't the wisest choice they could have made, but it was their choice.

Vishnu called to them, a soft meow in the drifting whiteness. Had he seen something? Was he warning them about an unseen obstacle ahead? Or was he merely coaxing them along, his two companions in the night?

Mr. D supposed they would find out, in due time.

They kept walking.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

THE APOCALYPTUS BLOOMS

EVERYTHING you may have heard about Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* is true. Tedious, brilliant, too long, not long enough, sophomoric, hilarious, Dick-ian, Ick-ian, foul-mouthed, Chaucerian, derivative, unique, epic, a waste of two hours and twenty-four minutes, crap on a stick, the work of a burgeoning genius, nothing like his first film, *Darko*-esque, visionary, pretentious, angry, petulant, mesmerizing, sleep-inducing, a parody, a comedy.... Got a favorite adjective or adjectival phrase? It probably can be applied to some portion of this movie. What Kelly has given us is not so much a portrait of an alternate America, but rather his film seeks to embody the country as it has come to be after President Lower Primate and his gang of monkey-chunks have beaten on it with their ugly sticks for eight years, leaving behind a blitzed, paranoid, chaotic wreck saturated with DayGlo pop culture and violent imagery, populated by the confused, the stupefied, and the downright deluded, a runaway train of a nation heading full-out for the Lake of Fire, packed with partygoers and doom-sayers whose arms and legs and heads are sticking out the windows, yelling, "Whee!" and "The end is nigh!" and so on, while an enormous boombox drowns out their cries with corporate rock anthems advertising scented panty shields and persimmon-flavored energy drinks.

I don't know about you, but to me all that sounds like Twenty-First century naturalism, a big, nasty, sloppy joke-kiss blown by a grinning skull.

If Kelly, whose first film, 2001's *Donnie Darko*, has become a cult

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touchstone, essaying a bittersweet portrait of pre-millennial America and its more humanistic, soulful obsessions, dealing with teenagers, time travel, and love...if Kelly had wanted to play it safe, he would have made a lean, gritty little film with conspicuous acting and joyless bloodletting, illustrating the dark side of contemporary America, something to ponder and absorb, to meditate grimly upon, and he would have offered it up to the critical establishment, saying, "See, I am one of you. Let me in. Here. Take my child, but please don't hurt it." And the critical establishment, composed of trivial old or old-in-spirit men and women, whose hearts are sometimes touched by such abasements, would have given that movie grudging praise and replied, "We anoint you." For whatever reason, however, Kelly decided that managing his career was less important than making the picture he wanted, a decision both foolhardy and admirably brave. As happens with many second films (many second novels, as well), encouraged by his rookie success, he attempted to stuff everything he knew into the film and thus ended up with idiot jam on his face. That he did not succeed, that he is not yet and may never be a sufficiently fluent artist to pull off this trick, should not be held against him — or maybe it should, but it shouldn't be hung about his neck like an albatross, and the virtues of his movie should not be neglected, as they have been, in favor of dwelling on its flaws.

Leaving the theater after a viewing of *Southland Tales*, I had a mental image that seemed to sum up what I had seen and I offer it here for whatever it's worth. I was watching an old-fashioned Peter Max-inspired, Yellow Submarine-type animation: a wild-haired young man was walking down a city street straight toward the camera, and once he drew close to the fourth wall, he projectile-vomited all over the lens, a psychedelic spew of daisies and yuck and puppies and Che Guevara heads and toasters and farm animals and Aces of Spades and so forth that evolved in the way of a kaleidoscope, the images changing to suit every new pattern, the patterns dissolving into fractures of light and still more yuck...and then this, too, dissolved and I saw one of the people who had been vomited on, a young woman, walking down the same city street, spattered with Lava lamp-colored puke, each spatter yielding its own odor (some quite fragrant, some not), each gradually fading until finally, two hours and

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twenty-four minutes later, a single stubborn stain remained on her coat sleeve and she paused at the entrance to a dry cleaners, sniffing the sleeve, as if debating whether or not to have the stain removed.

Southland Tales has been called Lynch-ian. I'm not too sure. Kelly proudly announces his influences (every now and again one floats bargelike down the Celluloid River, bearing a sign, NOTABLE INFLUENCE HERE!), and Lynch is definitely listed among them; yet Lynch has a touch of Andy Warhol in him. He likes to be coy with the audience, employing his "Ooh, I'm so sinister and mysterious" shtick, whereas in *Southland Tales*, Kelly takes more of the exuberant, pissed-off, demented Jackson Pollock approach to narrative architecture or the lack thereof. While Lynch's films are mannered and arrogantly try to persuade us that he knows what he's about, even if we can't understand it, the impression left by *Southland Tales* is that Kelly simply couldn't fit all his architecture in, or else he couldn't wrap his head around such a totally awesome concept as the end of the world without running a little amok, and he's sorry, really he is, and he wants to explain everything and will gladly sell you some graphic novels to help clarify matters (Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of the story are for sale in that form; the movie consists of Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

Since debuting the film at Cannes, where it was vilified by critics, booed by a portion of the audience, and its entrails displayed on a pike before a picture of the Lion King in catacombs beneath Paris, where the house of Navarre still reigns, Kelly has gone back in and redone the voiceover (a necessary evil, in this instance), added special effects and a prologue to flesh out the backstory, and trimmed about twenty minutes, losing several subplots and a character or two in the process; but there are too many characters to name, in any case, and subplots still dangle from the movie like (to overwork a metaphor) the roots of an aquatic plant torn loose from its mooring and set adrift on a stormy sea, rendered ungainly and on the verge of being capsized by these loose ends.

It opens with camcorder footage taken at a Texan Fourth of July shindig back in 2005, showing a mushroom cloud blooming above the town of Abilene; terrorists subsequently destroy El Paso, thereby initiating WWIII, a conflict fought on fronts in North Korea, Syria,

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Iraq, etc., and our country is buttoned down tight. Homeland Security has morphed into an agency called USIDent, which spies on the citizenry and controls the Internet. Interstate travel has been virtually banned. Some Venice Beach-based Marxist revolutionaries led by Zora Carmichaels (Cheri Oteri, one of four or five ex-*SNL* vets in the cast), a group constituted chiefly of slam poets, actors, and filmmakers, are attempting to overthrow the government. We're swiftly running out of oil, but help is on the way in the person of Baron Von Westphalen (played by a shrilly annoying Wallace Shawn), an eccentric German scientist who has developed an alternative power source, Fluid Karma, that utilizes the motion of ocean waves — FK also serves as an hallucinogenic drug that was tested on (among other soldiers) Pilot Abiline (Justin Timberlake), a scarred Iraqi vet who hangs around Venice Beach and provides the film with a sardonic narration, laced with quotes from the Book of Revelation. That takes care of the prologue.

The plot...well, there's a lot of it, most taking place in L.A. over the July Fourth weekend of 2008, just prior to an important presidential primary. Here are the basics. Action superstar Boxer Santaros (Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) has been kidnapped and stricken with amnesia during a trip into the desert and has forgotten about his marriage to Madeline Frost (Mandy Moore), the daughter of Senator Bobby Frost and his wife Nana Mae (Miranda Richardson) who dresses like a dowager Vulcan and runs USIDent and hopes to Lady-Macbeth her way to the White House à la Angela Lansbury in *The Manchurian Candidate*. Since his return from the desert, Boxer has hooked up with Krysta Now (Sarah Michelle Gellar), a simple-minded, new Age-y porn star and the host of a *View*-like TV show for porn actresses who give good talk, with whom he has co-written an apocalyptic screenplay called *The Power* that has some eerie similarities to what is secretly happening in the world.

Boxer, as it turns out, is being manipulated by two allied conspiracies, the first engineered by a pornographer (Nora Dunn) who is using sex videos she made with Boxer to blackmail Senator Frost into influencing a vote that will drastically curtail the powers of USIDent. Meanwhile, the Venice Beach Marxists have a plan to foment a violent revolt against the government. They have kidnapped a cop, Roland

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Taverner (Seann William Scott) and replaced him with his twin, Ronald Taverner (also Scott), a disturbed war vet whose reflection doesn't appear to be acting in concert with his body. The intent is for Ronald to take Boxer on a drive-along (research for his next film role) and involve him in a racist murder; but before they can achieve their ends, a real racist cop (Jon Lovitz, who manages to out-annoy Wallace Shawn) commits a real racist murder. And before the streets of L.A. erupt in violent rebellion, before a mega-zeppelin carries most of the principals off to their respective destinies, before a flying ice cream truck — the mobile salesroom of weapons dealer Walter Mung (Christopher Lambert) — unites with a power station that may be causing a rift in the fourth dimension, there's much, much more, including a baby whose impending bowel movement may prove to be a thermonuclear trigger (an obvious reference to *Gravity's Rainbow*).

There were a great many things I liked about *Southland Tales*. Dwayne Johnson impressed me — he just might have the chops to be a more-than-decent actor if he quits working in cute-kid movies. Sara Michelle Gellar's performance reminded me of why I dug her in *Buffy*. I liked Ling Bai as Von Westphalen's dragon lady and Amy Poehler as Dream, a Neo-Marxist slam poet. I liked a hilariously obscene automobile commercial, some of the freaky newscasts, and a number of fragments and scenes that are probably going to wind up as hits on YouTube, which may be the best way to see the movie. I liked the musical numbers: Krysta Now's single "Teen Horniness Is Not a Crime"; Rebekah Del Rio's rendition of the National Anthem, doing for Kelly's film what she did for David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, when she dropped in to belt out Roy Orbison's "Crying"; and I like Timberlake lip-synching to the Killers's "All the Things that I've Done," while nurses wearing blond wigs recline atop pinball machines behind him...though I haven't the foggiest why this scene was included in the movie.

So much of *Southland Tales* falls flat, however, it's impossible to embrace the film fully. From moment to moment, the film plays like a farce, a doomsday noir, a paranoid fantasy, an *SNL* sketch, and at times I had the idea that I was listening to a meth-head ramble on about his favorite conspiracy theories, lapsing now and again into unintelligible babble, perking up

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and almost making sense for a minute or two. Yet I've rarely been so conflicted about a movie, so unwilling to go thumbs up or thumbs down. It may be I sympathize with Kelly, having written an incoherent second novel myself, or it may be that there are so many lame, by-the-numbers left-wing movies out there (*Lions for Lambs* and *Rendition*, for example), I appreciate the fact that he took a chance and went for it, that his ambition exceeded his grasp, and I'm curious to see whether the excised twenty minutes add to or detract from the film, and I want to see this version again, on the off-chance that I've misjudged it terribly. Until then, I join the rest of the world in their conviction that Kelly should be excoriated, given prizes, pilloried, praised, beaten by chimps, encouraged in his madness, charged with crimes against the Aesthetic, awarded the Accolade, shunned, taken to our collective bosom, scathingly renounced, treated to grapes and honey by beautiful maidens, ordered to commit seppuku....

Coming Attractions

SPRING SHOULD BE here for good (in the Northern Hemisphere, that is) by the time next month's issue arrives — and with it will come a fantastic fantasy about death and renewal by Rachel Pollack. "Immortal Snake" depicts an unusual civilization where storytellers hold sway but the real power resides with a group of priests called Readers who track God's writing in the sky. This one's a tale that'll stay with you — you won't want to miss it.

We also expect to have another Robert Reed story next month, "Reunion," in which we'll meet a rather accomplished assemblage of alumni...along with the person who thinks she knows their secret.

Our inventory continues to grow, with new stories flowing in from the likes of Michael Blumlein, Charles Coleman Finlay, Marc Laidlaw, and Nancy Springer. Go to *www.fsfmag.com* and subscribe to make sure you get to enjoy all the good fiction running through our pages.

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Kate Wilhelm's most recent books include the novels The Unbidden Truth *and* Sleight of Hand *and a short book for writers and readers called* Storyteller: Writing Lessons and More from 27 Years of the Clarion Writers' Workshop.

Here she presents us with the story of a young woman whose life changes abruptly.

The Fountain of Neptune

By Kate Wilhelm

SHE DID MOST THINGS RIGHT, got a second opinion, did not panic, did not go on a drinking binge, or search for a third opinion. What she failed to do was take a friend with her or tape record the conversations with both brain surgeons. Consequently, her memory of what one or the other said proved to be sketchy, but key phrases were ineradicable. Inoperable. A baseline CAT scan. More blurred vision likely, more frequently. Possible double vision. Possible distorted images, illusions. Possible hallucination. Probable headaches.

"Live your life normally," one or the other said. "I'd like to see you again in three months."

"Why?"

"With another CAT scan we can better predict what to expect."

Her question had covered both parts, live a normal life, as well as a return appointment. A normal life meant working every day for a corporation that cared as little about her as she cared about it. She remained in her apartment for several days, spending time weeping, then she added up

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her assets, including the sale of her car, cashing in her retirement plan, selling most of her possessions. She bought a laptop computer, a beginner's Italian language CD, and a new digital camera. And she made a reservation for a flight to Rome. At the last minute she made it first class.

She had been to Rome once for a three-day conference and one day of sightseeing. At the near demand of a tour guide, she and everyone else in the group had dutifully tossed a coin into Trevi Fountain. "Rome will call you back," the young guide had said.

She did not tell her mother, who would berate her for leaving a job with health benefits at a time like this. Nor did she tell her sister, who would scream and wail and insist that she come live with her and her family of four noisy children under the age of twelve and a husband who worked when it was convenient. She told them both that she was being transferred to the Rome office. She did not burden her few good friends who would grieve helplessly, or her ex, who would not. And she did not tell anyone in the office. She knew it would be on her insurance record, and she never would be insurable again.

She was forty-two years old and more than likely she would be dead within six months. So she flew to Rome first class.

She had found an apartment on the Internet, and chose it because it had Internet access, sparing her the search for a cyber café. Her landlord thought she was a writer, and in a sense she was. She had spent more than a decade writing meticulous reports for an R&D department, and now she began keeping a record of the progression of her inoperable tumor. At first there was no particular reason, but after she missed her appointment scheduled for early May, she decided to send the medical record to the brain surgeons.

The blurred vision came more often, sometimes embarrassingly in public, more often when she was in her apartment.

She spent one week in Florence, awestruck by David and the Pietà, overwhelmed by the Tivoli gardens, and the Uffizi museum, but her call had issued from Rome and she was not tempted to leave again. There were days in the Vatican museum; operas in a gothic church; days wandering around the Colosseum, populating the arena with gladiators, the forum with politicians; a special exhibition of Leonardo's work reproduced full size; a close-up view of the Last Supper....

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She was in love with Rome, with the streets strewn with litter that came alive in any breeze, with the gelatos and pizza slices topped with anything edible, the espresso, all the food. And most of all she was in love with the magic of its sunlight, the complexity of Rome's agelessness, where contemporary glass and steel structures stood side by side with those from a past of almost inconceivable antiquity — a monument here, a stele there, remnants of a temple, a statue, the juxtaposition of an ephemeral flicker in time and the mute eloquent endurance of millennia.

In the evenings she studied Italian, wrote her daily report, and downloaded her pictures onto her computer, deleted many, manipulated others, enhanced some, and put the saved images on a CD, to be sent to her sister eventually.

That evening, the last day of May, she gazed at her latest pictures of Neptune's Fountain in Piazza Navona. It was her favorite so far and she had visited it several times. Neptune doing battle with an octopus and nymphs mounted on horses rising from the fountain basin. Neptune was as muscular as a body builder. All the male statues were, and the females were all lissome, willowy, with not a muscle or bone in sight. The steeds looked wild and beautiful. But something was wrong.

She looked for previous pictures she had taken of the fountain, then printed the versions to compare them, find the cause for her unease. It came as a mild surprise to see that she had been to that one fountain four different times. The pictures were dated, and the first one had been taken April eleventh, one in early May, one mid-May, and the most recent on the last day of May.

After putting them in chronological order to examine them, she gasped, and stood up so quickly, so urgently that she knocked her chair over. Steadying herself with a hand on the table, she closed her eyes hard, rubbed them, and without looking again at the pictures yet, she backed away from the table, and only then opened her eyes and crossed the few feet to her tiny kitchen for a glass of water.

All the pictures were different. "It's started," she said under her breath.

Distorted images, one of the doctors had said. Illusions.

She had entered the next phase, she thought dully, and forced herself

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to return to the table, to study the set of pictures, seeking to learn when the new phase had started without her noticing.

Some of the views were from different places around the fountain, single shots, but the four she singled out had all been taken from the same location. She had been seated on the same bench for each of the four. The changes were subtle, but unmistakable. They presented a sequence in time. First the nymph's head was turned away slightly, her hair streaming behind her; the horse's head was lowered, and towering over them Neptune was straining in a struggle with the octopus that had one arm wrapped around the god's leg. Next the nymph's head was turned more to the front, and the horse had lifted its head. The octopus was lower down on Neptune's leg.

They were not illusions, she realized, but full-blown hallucinations. She was telling herself a story and providing graphic images to illustrate it. In the last picture the nymph had finished turning her head, and was smiling up at Neptune, and he was done with his mock battle, and now was looking down on the nymph, his hand extended toward her. Even the horse was looking at him in that picture.

Slowly, moving with care, she gathered all the printouts and slipped them into an envelope. Hallucinations, the final phase?

A church bell tolled the hour of eight, her daily signal to leave the apartment, drop in at a newsstand to buy a newspaper, go to dinner at a neighborhood tratoria. She stifled a giggle as she wondered if she would hear Pan's pipes, see his mad dance.

She walked the block to the newsstand, purchased her newspaper, and on impulse asked for a picture of the Fontana di Netunno en Piazza Navona. The shopkeeper smiled at her Italian baby talk and answered in English, as he always did.

"Neptune's Fountain, poster size? Postage?"

She didn't know how to say about eight by ten, and held up her hands to indicate the size.

He found one in a stack of glossy prints and as she counted out money, he said, "You should visit it at dawn, the first light of the sun. Some say that's the time of magic."

"Grazie," she said and he answered that she was welcome.

That night she was not surprised when the glossy professional print

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proved to be unlike any of her own. Again, not glaring differences, but significant, meaningful.

That night she also recalled another of the phrases one or the other doctor had used: need a companion. Of course, she thought, she couldn't be left alone acting out a hallucinatory experience. She could harm herself or, worse, harm others. A companion. Institution? It was just as well she had put it out of mind for four months. She marveled at how her mind was protecting her from remembering too much.

There were things she had to do: address the envelope to her sister, write her a letter, include a copy of her will, details about her bank account, some passwords, name and address of her attorney who had drawn up the will. Edit the ongoing report of her situation for the doctors, make two printouts, address those envelopes.

And she had to arrive at the Fountain of Neptune at dawn to see the magic of the first rays of light. That had to wait until after she had taken care of more mundane things.

THE DAYS WERE becoming quite warm, even hot, but the predawn twilight was pleasantly cool, and there was a slight mist in the air. She was disappointed to see another person at the fountain that early morning, a man seated on the bench she had come to regard as her own. He rose and moved to a different bench as she approached. They were the only two people in sight at that hour.

"Good morning," he said as she drew near. "It's a lovely morning, a lovely time of day."

An Englishman? Canadian? Possibly even an American. He had no trace of an accent. She nodded at him and sat down.

The light was changing from the soft pearliness of predawn to a more luminous, sharper light, the mist was dissipating and the world was taking on distinct edges, defined shapes where there had been suggestions of shapes.

She blinked. Before her was an expanse as black and smooth as polished ebony. Then there was a ripple, another, and with astonishing swiftness a golden aura spread over the surface, to be shattered by a roiling eruption, a crashing turbulence that cast golden waters into the air like

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glittering beads of gold, showers of gold, geysers of gold, fountains of gold. Arising in the waves were horses, snorting, neighing, tossing their heads, scattering more gold. Their riders were maidens bent low over streaming manes, and in their midst stood a powerful man who commanded the waves to cease, and there was calm.

She didn't know when she had risen, if she had cried out, but the stranger was at her side, his hand steadying her, and the Fountain of Neptune was a fountain.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She moistened her lips, nodded. "A dizzy spell," she said weakly. "It's over."

"Perhaps a coffee?" he said. "You're very pale. You're trembling."

She groped for the bench and sat down. "I just need a moment," she said. Her heart was thumping wildly, her breathing ragged.

He sat on the same bench, and they both gazed at the fountain.

"They call this the Eternal City," he said in a reflective manner. "People link the phrase to the Catholic Church, of course, but it was an eternal city long before the church was founded. Eternity stretches both ways, to forever. Some say the old gods are still alive in the real eternal city. Perhaps they do yet live. Perhaps, like the city, they are eternal."

He was talking to calm her, she thought. Maybe he had been afraid she would faint, fall down, and now he was waiting to make certain she was all right. She glanced at him. "You're not Italian, are you?" she said, not for information, but in order to let him know he could leave now, she had recovered. Just a momentary dizzy spell.

"No. I'm a Roman. Antonio Mercurio. Are you certain you don't want a coffee?"

"Thank you, but no. I'll be on my way in a minute or two."

"You saw them, didn't you?" he said in that same reflective tone he had been using.

She stood up quickly, adjusted her shoulder bag, and started to walk away fast, without speaking.

"Don't be afraid, Julia," he said. "I'll be here for you when you return."

She stopped moving and for a time she did not even breathe. Dear God, she thought then, he was part of it, part of her hallucination, no more real

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than the golden water of the sea, no more real than the snorting, neighing horses. He knew her name. Of course he did. He was her creation and knew whatever she knew. Suddenly she wanted a cup of coffee, hot and black and very strong coffee, but she did not move. Her vision had become too blurred to dare take a step. Shapes that minutes before had hard distinct edges had become shadow figures.

"Now we will have coffee," he said at her side, his hand firm on her arm. She did not resist, but let him lead her through a world of shadows, around a corner, to a chair.

"It passes quickly," she said. "Please do not concern yourself with me."

It was already passing. An awning overhead, tables with place mats, an elderly gentleman reading a newspaper with an espresso before him. He lowered the paper, smiled broadly at her companion, and spoke in rapid-fire Italian, too fast for her to follow.

The man across the table from her returned the smile and replied briefly. She bit her lip. Stock phrases she had memorized? Something she had learned and consciously had forgotten?

"Why would the Roman gods alone be eternal?" she asked, and felt that the question had come almost out of desperation for something to say, something that was not the something that needed to be said. Was the table, the other customer, all of it one big hallucinatory experience? Where was the start and end of it?

"Not just the Roman gods," he said, smiling slightly at her. "Perhaps all of them. These are the gods you heard and responded to. Few hear, fewer respond, and even fewer admit the evidence of their senses."

"If I had responded to Vishnu, I would be in Calcutta sipping tea," she murmured. "Is that your meaning?"

He laughed.

She looked away from him, at the street where shopkeepers were starting to open awnings, to put out signs advertising their wares, arrange pastries in windows, open freezer cases with gelato.... Although it all looked real, concrete, she no longer felt any trust in the evidence of her senses. The evidence of her senses was being warped by a growth in her head.

"Perhaps it is granting you freedom to see for the first time what has always been there," he said.

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Resolutely she kept her gaze averted. A waiter came and greeted her companion as an old friend, volubly, effusively, including her in his obvious welcome.

When a fast-paced dialog ensued, she felt her hands trembling again. The waiter laughed, spread his hands, and bowed to her before he withdrew, shaking with laughter.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"I told you. Antonio Mercurio."

She resisted the temptation to look at his feet clad in sandals, and he laughed again. "No, no wings on my heels."

"I'm going mad," she said in the same low voice, hardly above a whisper. "I see illusions, hallucinations. I don't know what's real, what isn't."

"Reality has many faces," he said. "You have completed the first two parts. There is one remaining. You must admit the evidence of your senses."

She shook her head. The waiter returned with coffee and they spoke words she could not understand. She gripped her coffee cup, welcoming the heat.

"What did you see in your pictures?" Mercurio asked when the waiter left once more.

"Changes, a sequence of changes. I hallucinated them to illustrate a story in my head. There weren't any real changes."

"Was the sequence finished?"

"I don't know."

"And at dawn, what did you see?"

She shook her head harder, risking blurred vision again.

"When we leave, you must choose. Turn left and I'll walk with you to your bus and wait for it with you. Turn right, and we return."

"Back to the Fountain of Neptune."

"Fontana di Netunne," he said. "And you must then tell me what you saw at dawn."

Back to her apartment, probably a doctor, hospital. She pushed her coffee cup back and rose from her chair, and they took the few steps to the sidewalk where she paused, then turned right.

"I saw a golden sea, horses rising with maiden riders, I saw Neptune

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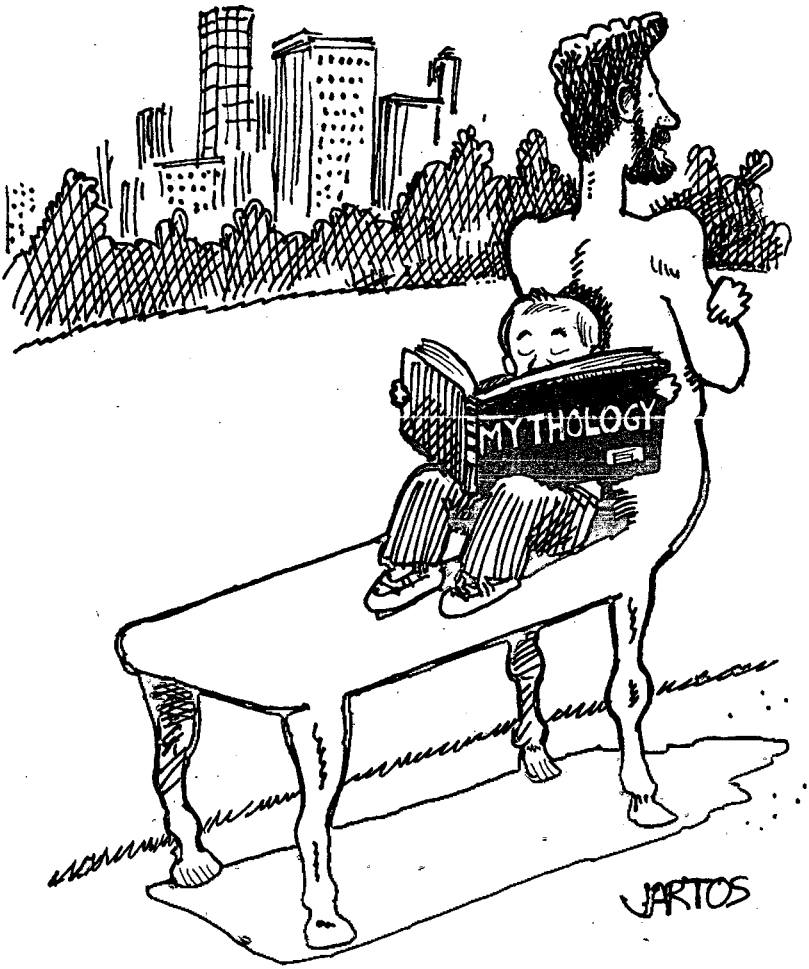
command the waves to stop roiling and crashing, and there was a calm golden sea."

They approached the fountain, and now the sequence was finished. Neptune had completed his gesture. His gaze was on her, his extended hand reached out to her, and with Mercury at her side she walked into the warm, golden water of Netunne's sea.



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Steven Utley's most recent project is an anthology coedited with Michael Bishop, Passing for Human. *For most of the past decade, he has been writing a series of linked stories about researchers who travel back in time to the Silurian Age. Since our Dec. 2000 issue, we've published seven of the stories, including "Invisible Kingdoms," "Promised Land," and "A Paleozoic Palimpsest." (Check our Website to see if we've reprinted one of them this month.) You needn't have read any of the previous ones to enjoy this latest look at those who ventured back in time.*

The 400-Million-Year Itch

By Steven Utley

"One gets a bad habit of being unhappy."
—George Eliot

SHE HAD TOLD THE EARNEST young man repeatedly, "I have no interesting stories to tell." He was determined to interview her, however, and now they sat on opposite sides of the small glass-topped table in the garden room of her home in Riverside. The robutler had brought tea and tea things and retired discreetly. "I can't tell you anything that isn't already in the books. I can't tell you who said what to whom. I have a terrible memory for dates. I can't even remember most of the names."

The young man indicated the perfectly set table and smiled disarmingly and said, "Perhaps one of those might help."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I read somewhere that a crumb of madeleine soaked in tea can be a wonderful memory aid."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

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He seemed nonplused by the utter collapse of his *bon mot*. He recovered quickly, though, and said, "What's *missing* from the books is *you* and *your* view of things. You were there through the early days. The exciting part."

"The exciting part. Well." She laughed a shivery, silvery laugh. "It recedes in the memory even when I want to think about it. It's become as distant and unreal to me as the Paleozoic itself. There was hardly anything to the Paleozoic, nothing vivid or extreme, unless you count the monotony. It was just like any lonely and desolate place in the world today, without any particular — *peculiar* element of danger of its own."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, you don't have to go through a spacetime anomaly to Laurentia to drown or die of dehydration. Any modern desert will do, or any hot day in a major city, for that matter. And you can drown in your own bath tub. And Gondwana, I understand, all Gondwana was, was just Antarctica on a much bigger scale. Four whole continents, including Antarctica itself, plus India, jammed together and sitting right on the South Pole. You can go freeze your tail off in Antarctica. That's if you want to go all the way to Antarctica to do what you could do in Wisconsin in the wintertime."

He smiled, all calculated winsomeness. "I'm sorry, but I just find that very hard to believe. Spacetime anomalies, the primeval earth, prehistoric animals — "

"*Small* prehistoric animals."

"What about sea scorpions?"

"I think their reputation for ferocity must have been grossly inflated. I never heard of anybody being hurt by one."

"Then what about the so-called jump?"

"The jump doesn't count. That was just how you got there. It rattled my teeth some. It was extremely rough on a few people. Chalk that up to the vagaries of spacetime anomalies. But once you got there, the only extreme thing about it was the monotony. Unless you're the kind who oohed and aahed over trilobites, and even then I'm not sure you'd be distracted for very long. Alcoholism was rampant. So were — you see, when you jump, you go through with all your human baggage. You still have to face the day every morning and deal with other people and get

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things done. You still have to be who you are. Sometimes who you are isn't enough. Sometimes it's too much."

"Still — hardly humdrum stuff. Plus, you knew and worked intimately with one of the true titans of science."

She fixed a glittering eye upon him. "Yes."

"It must have been great, working with him."

"It," she said, and considered her next words very carefully.

"Amy, if I have to go," Cutsinger had told her, "you have to go, too."

They were lingering over dinner, mildly drunk on wine, Cutsinger humorously self-mocking, but, still, serious in what he proposed they do.

"Well," she said, "You *know* you don't *have* to go. Frankly, I'm surprised you'd consider it. We can work on the new book here. You wouldn't have to leave the house."

He nodded. "And yet I feel I *do* have to go. Much as the Wright brothers had to go up in their aeroplane, or Bell had to speak into his telephone."

"It's not like you *invented* the spacetime anomaly."

He laughed softly. "Despite my protests, less rigorously accurate practitioners of the journalistic trade have created that impression in the public mind. I am the wizard of time."

He was, she knew, not being falsely modest. He had not only understood what the anomaly was, how it could be exploited, and had been able to describe lucidly its least arcane aspects, so that a difficult concept could be comprehended, with a modicum of mental effort, by untrained minds — those of the general public and, more particularly, of people charged with overseeing allocation of funds. In short, he had fired everyone's imagination. Not that he possessed an especially winning manner or that, as the saying went, the television camera loved him. Time Travel Into The Past, inaccurate though the phrase was, had virtually sold itself.

"I am," Cutsinger said, "popularly and inextricably associated with the phenomenon of the anomaly and the Paleozoic expedition. So of course I must go through the anomaly myself. The public, damn them, expect it."

"Didn't you always use to tell your classes that quantum physics isn't a hands-on science? Anyway, it wouldn't be a pleasure trip. That first man

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who went through the anomaly said it's about as pleasurable as getting hit by lightning can be."

"Not to go," he explained in a heavy self-mocking tone, "will demote The Wizard of Time from the magnitude of a Columbus, a Magellan, to that of a mere Henry the Navigator."

"Prince Henry did vital work without ever putting to sea."

"Yes. But everyone *remembers* Columbus."

So that had been that.

Yet from their first day after they had gone through the anomaly, there were signs of trouble. Having recovered from the effects of the transfer, she had acted upon a natural impulse to see the strange prehistoric world they now inhabited. Cutsinger had looked irritated and told her, "We have an awful lot of work to do, and we should get to it." She could not always be put off, however, but asked directions and immediately headed topside. At the bottom of a ladder she looked up and saw blue sky and serene clouds. When she emerged onto a catwalk just under the overhang of the helicopter deck there was the calm black sea, and covering it like gelatin as far as she could see were the iridescent float-sacs of thousands upon thousands of graptolite colonies. She turned and saw two bluejackets nearby, laughed and pointed, and they laughed, too, waved, exchanged inaudible comments between themselves, then laughed even harder. Suddenly abashed, she returned below, to Cutsinger, nervous and sweating at the bottom of the ladder. Now that he had indulged her on this occasion, he testily declared that it was time to buckle down and get to work.

The work in question consisted in unpacking and pawing through and generally disarranging notes for Cutsinger's next book. After two hours, Cutsinger abruptly said something about wanting to look in on the jump station.

Amy sat on the edge of her bunk and looked deep into the future and recalled a line from H. G. Wells, to the effect that people were always amazed by the obvious results of their actions. She knew she could have predicted this. The great man suffered from agoraphobia. He could function perfectly well in a large room full of people — the consensus was that he had acquitted himself brilliantly in the early press conferences — for he said that he was fine as long as he had walls around him and a ceiling

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above. Enclosement equaled security. The big outdoors, however, the open sky, land, and sea, filled him with dread. Now he might risk nausea and glance through a porthole, to calculate the time of day — the familiar twenty-four-hour clock was useless here, maddeningly out of synch with the speeded-up days and nights — but remove him from the protection of a room, and he began to fidget and sweat, to tremble and stammer. And there were no skies, no lands, and no seas more open, more terrifying in the emptiness of the vistas they presented, than those of the Paleozoic.

I knew this, she thought, I knew this I knew this I knew this. He will never leave the ship. He will never go topside. Here we'll remain for month upon month, officially on an expenses-paid sabbatical but actually entombed in this ship. I knew this. She knew he was a theoretician who would have nothing to do with the running of the jump station, though he might spend inordinate amounts of time within its ozone-scented confines. The technicians there knew their jobs and would have little interest in the theoretical end of things, and in due course they would regard Cutsinger as a pain in the butt. I knew all this, she said, and still I let it happen.

That evening, their first in Paleozoic time, they were to dine at the captain's table. The captain, they had been reliably informed, was Navy to the marrow, always dressed for dinner, and every civilian invited to dine with him — even paleontologists, a notoriously slovenly lot — was expected or in any event felt obliged to follow suit, to the exhaustion of sartorial resources. Amy had come prepared: she laid out the dinner gown. Cutsinger looked at it dubiously.

"That gown," he said, "defies every physical law. What keeps it from falling off you?"

"Surface tension."

"Are you really intending to wear that thing?"

"You didn't complain at the Nobels. Anyway, the captain's a stickler for form. Besides, at the Nobels I was just another dame in a gown. Here, I expect to be the *only* dame in a gown."

She did not regret her choice. The table was immaculately set, the stewards seemed to gleam almost as brightly as the polished service. She found herself seated next to the captain himself and across from a newcomer, introduced as "the famous author" So And So, next to whom

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sat a volcanologist, also a newcomer. The volcanologist beamed at her and said, "I do Empedocles one better. I go down into the volcano like him, but then I come back out again."

"I'm sorry — who was Empedocles?"

"Ancient Greek fellow who jumped into the crater of Mount Etna to prove whether or not he was immortal. Turned out he wasn't."

"Ah. He must have been very disappointed."

"Well, briefly, yes, I'm sure."

The round of introductions continued. There was a Navy chaplain and, at the far end of the table from the captain, a marine biologist, and another man the captain said had been head of the sleep-disorder center at Cornell University's New York Hospital in Westchester County. "I'm not sure," the captain admitted, "how to describe what you're doing in Paleozoic time, Doctor."

"Observing all the observers," said the sleep-disorder expert with a quick smile.

"As you can see," the captain said to Amy, "there is a good deal more to this expedition than simply a bunch of paleontologists collecting trilobites and primitive plants. There are soil scientists here, and an astronomy team."

Probably inevitably, the first question directed to the author was, "What have you written?" and clearly he had been expecting it, or at least hoping for it. He was a large man whose heavy egg-shaped head surmounted a heavy egg-shaped body. He patted his red lips with his napkin and favored his questioner, the chaplain, with a warm smile. "Fiction, for the most part," he said. "Perhaps you've read something of mine."

Everyone else at the table appeared more or less to doubt it, but the chaplain, being the sort of man he was, asked, "Please, what are some titles?"

"*Anomalous Al* had just been published and *Planet Janet* was still on the bestseller list back home when I left to come here."

"Ah," said the chaplain. "*Science* fiction."

The author grinned. "What other kind is there?"

"Space travel," the captain put in helpfully, "alien life-forms," and Amy herself contributed, "Spacetime anomalies," drawing a darting look from Cutsinger.

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"My light reading matter of choice," the chaplain said apologetically, "is mythology."

"All I read," said the volcanologist, not in the least apologetically, "are murder mysteries."

"I'm afraid," Amy said, "about all I read are the scientific journals."

The captain offered the crestfallen author a regretful look, and the volcanologist asked, "Do you use Ediot to write your stories?"

The author fixed him with a suddenly cold eye and answered frostily, "I do all my own writing. *All* my own."

"No offense. I just — you know what they say. 'Ediot, the salvation of many a writing-challenged author.' Not to imply that you're writing-challenged. But I do a fair amount of writing myself. Technical stuff, reports, still, I find it's hard work. I use any help I can get."

"A creative, idiosyncratic writer is on his own. Ediot is for formal memoranda and other business correspondence. It was conceived with those ends in mind. It's purposely devoid of personality. So it doesn't do idiosyncrasy well."

The volcanologist grinned. "Still, I understand it's been used by some uncreative, unidiosyncratic writers to turn out a commercially viable work or two."

The author said, "I don't deny that," but looked as though he wished that he could.

"Still — "

To avert an outbreak of hostilities, the chaplain said, "Are you here to research a new time-travel story?"

"Time travel is part of my stock in trade, of course. But I have to confess I much prefer space-travel stories. Some people go somewhere in a starship and find something peculiar. This junket is something my agent sold my publisher on. If memory serves, their exact words were, 'The Paleozoic expedition has produced a lot of scientific papers, but it hasn't inspired a thing in the way of literature or art.'"

"Oh, I dunno," said the volcanologist. "I read a mystery once about this detective who investigates a — something to do with smuggling trilobite larvae, exotic pets, exotic plants, back to the twenty-first century. Was that something of yours?"

"No, but in *Anomalous Al* there's — "

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"The smuggling," the unheeding volcanologist went on, "was just to set everything else in motion, of course, and get you to all the good stuff you expect to find in a detective story. Dead bodies turning up everywhere, beatings, a beautiful nymphomaniac volcanologist! The main bad guy — "

"Please," said the chaplain, "don't tell us. We might find ourselves watching that show one of these days. At least up to the point where the beautiful nymphomaniac comes into the plot."

"You might not last that long, Chaplain. I didn't say it was any *good*."

The author avoided looking at the volcanologist and said evenly, "As my agent and publisher were saying, about literature. 'The old whaling industry begot *Moby-Dick*, the Civil War begot *The Red Badge of Courage*, World War One begot — "

"World War Two!" The volcanologist laughed. "And then World War Two begat rockets and atomic bombs, which misbegat a lot of wretched pulp fiction!"

The author leaned away from the volcanologist, for whom his dislike was becoming palpable, and the latter, who patently did not care, said to the chaplain, "So, *you* came all this way to tend the local flock?"

The chaplain was a wiry fortyish man with alert eyes and laugh lines around his mouth, and Amy had already decided that she liked his looks. To his further credit, she thought, he received the question as though it were not entirely inane. "Part of it," he said. "The Protestant portion of it." He smiled at the author, turned his head to flash it at Amy as well. "We have a priest and a rabbi on board, too."

"Ah, of course," said the volcanologist. "Even Navy men of the cloth are specialists. And I imagine there'd be a mullah, too, if there were any Muslims attached to the expedition."

"There are some Muslims. Some Buddhists and Hindus, too."

"Do they just fend for themselves?"

"The Navy," the captain put in from his end of the table, "is only as good as its efforts to maintain its personnel at a peak of physical, mental, and spiritual health."

"How good of the Navy," the volcanologist said, "to see to everyone's needs! And lead them not into temptation, either. The Navy doesn't provide grog and brothels for its people, does it, Captain?"

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The captain looked as though he had bitten into something rancid on the end of his fork. "Certainly not!"

"But," the chaplain said, as easily as before, "there are still plenty of temptations, even here. Most of the enlisted personnel are men and women in their twenties. All volunteers, of course, and many of them with families back home. They're young, nevertheless, and a long way from home."

"Then I'm sure it's a good thing that experience has taught the Navy to prefer liberal men of the cloth to reactionary ones."

"Well — "

"After all, what could be more hellish than to be trapped with some raging Calvinist on a ship on the open sea, and a prehistoric sea at that? Seasick, four hundred million years from home, *and* predestined to eternal damnation! Under such conditions, anyone's morale would collapse! To say nothing of his morals." The volcanologist winked at Amy. "Or hers."

In spite of herself, or in spite of Cutsinger, she smiled.

"It sounds pretty hellish, all right," the chaplain agreed. "The great radicalizing experience of my life — apart from when I felt the call to God's service, that's as radicalizing as it gets — I felt pure revulsion at the ideas embodied in Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon, 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.' I find the doctrine of predestination irreconcilable with the concept of a just and loving deity."

"Well," said the volcanologist, "even a depraved old secular humanist like me knows that."

Amy saw Cutsinger glance from the author to the chaplain. "It seems," he rumbled, "that I'm the raging Calvinist present." Every face turned toward him, except Amy's. She busied herself with her water glass. "Or," Cutsinger went on after a second, "the steel-trap determinist, anyhow. You're talking about free will."

The volcanologist was not easily cowed. He grinned at Cutsinger and said, "Or the next best thing to it."

"For free will to exist means that in a universe that works on the principle of cause and effect, human beings would have to be exempt from rules that apply to energy and matter in all their other forms."

"Doctor Cutsinger," the chaplain said, "that's the basic tenet of

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Christianity, of the Judeo-Christian tradition, of all religion. An omniscient, omnipotent deity makes the rules but, being also just, merciful, and loving, makes exceptions as well."

"I don't believe in deities, either. I stopped believing in invisible friends when I was still a child."

"Perhaps," the chaplain said good-naturedly, "if you had sought an invisible friend who offered salvation — "

"I believe in the either-or of quantum physics. Down at the micro level, everything's either-or. Either a particle does this or it does that. The universe replicates itself, each replica accommodates one of the possible outcomes. And every either-or begets still more either-or. Whence, endlessly geometrically multiplying universes. On the macro level, each of us makes choices all the time. Sometimes, afterward, we decide they were the wrong choices. We think, If only I'd done that instead of this, or, If only the other thing had happened and not this thing that has in fact happened. In other universes, we did do the other thing, and something else did happen. In one universe, I do the things that get me into Heaven. In another, I do the things that send me straight to Hell."

Amy sipped her water and found herself thinking an astonishing thought: Would that it were so.

The author's grin broadened. "You physicists make me fidget. Always arguing over the significance of fractions of a second."

"In terms of practical significance," Cutsinger said, "the argument pertains to nothing less important than fixing this expedition in spacetime."

"Exactly," said the chaplain. "Are we in Silurian time, or Devonian?"

"That," the volcanologist answered, "is the question most often asked by people who least understand that geologic time operates on quite an inhuman scale. It rarely coincides with human time, and then only catastrophically. The Silurian does not end at midnight on a Wednesday and the Devonian begin at twelve-oh-one on Thursday. There's no catastrophic event such as marks the K-T boundary. The significant revolution that does mark the S-D boundary occurs over a period of millions of years as Laurentia, Baltica, and Avalonia close on one another like scissor blades. They swing together as if on hinges, incidentally consuming the Iapetus seaway and raising mountain chains we can trace from Spitzbergen to Venezuela. But slowly. Very, very slowly."

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"Yes, of course," the author said, "I understand. Slowly."

"Well," said the chaplain, "I don't mind saying I'm proud to be a member of this expedition. I find it all tremendously exciting. You scientists go forth and come back with the most wonderful lots of specimens, plant, animal, mineral."

"Don't forget indeterminate." The marine biologist at the far end of the table had surprised everybody by speaking up. He looked surprised by his own temerity. Then he said, in a slightly nasal tone, "I like things to be organized, yet I know that taxonomy at some level breaks down as surely as quantum mechanics. At whatever points organisms begin to differentiate into the proto-animal, the proto-fungi, and so forth, gross taxonomy becomes subject to its own uncertainty principle."

SHE WENT to her bunk and lay listening to the ship's sounds. She tried lying on her side. She tried lying on her other side, her stomach, her back. She lay with her fists clenched and stared into the darkness, and then she squeezed her eyes shut until her nose stopped up and she had to relax to breathe. What's in the medicine kit for sleepy-time tonight? she wondered. She did not really want to drug herself to sleep, however; she had a hard enough time during the day without a hangover.

Maybe, she thought, I should just reach through the hatch and grab the first Navy boy who comes by and screw his brains out. Screw myself into a coma. I dimly recall that one often falls asleep after sex.

Well, she decided, it just might have to be rape or the next-worst thing. To the best of her knowledge the Navy men aboard, officers and ratings alike, simply did not look upon her as anything more than an appendage of Cutsinger's — though the dirtier-minded ones might, perhaps, imagine she was his lover. In truth, while she had suffered a protracted infatuation with the great man, he had not reciprocated, and their relationship had never moved any further beyond the platonic than occasional mild flirting.

Yes, of course, Amy had told people on occasions beyond counting, it is indeed a privilege and an honor to work with Cutsinger. At one time she had truly believed it, too. Even now, when she had long since decided otherwise, she comported herself as though she still believed it. She never

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qualified her statement within anyone's hearing by adding "even in the limited and limiting capacity he permits," let alone hinted that it was not that great a pleasure to work with him. The phrase "work with" was beginning to catch in her throat like a sob; she worked *for* Cutsinger, always had. At most, at best, she functioned as a glorified technical assistant, amanuensis, spokesperson — she bit hard on the word: *flunky* — to A Great Man, without the energy any more to counter, reflexively, this humiliating realization with the argument that the menial services she performed were necessitated by the nature of Cutsinger's affliction.

Maybe, she thought, I should just throw myself overboard. Or throw Cutsinger overboard. Oh, the questions that would be asked then. "How *could* you drown the great Cutsinger? What drove you to *do* such a terrible thing?" I was fed up, I'd say. Fed up to here with the great Cutsinger.

On her bunk, she finally slipped into unconsciousness, and the ship's mechanical pulse became Cutsinger's voice. The walls of his world surrounded her, closed in on her, crushed her flat. She slept, but not well, through that night and the many that followed.

He and she still dined at the captain's table, he still held forth at every opportunity on multiple universes, infinitely replicated Earths, and continually diverging timelines, and there was no chance of their being banished from officer's country, because, while he might be a bore, he was also a celebrity, and she, well, whoever she was, whatever she was, she was with him. Most of his listeners, however, signally failed to understand why the paradoxes implied by wave-function collapse could be avoided only by postulating geometrically multiplying universes, had given up trying to figure it out, and frankly admitted that they found it easier, somehow more comforting, simply to imagine that they had indeed traveled into the prehistoric past rather than to some parallel Earth where Paleozoic conditions still obtained. As far as they were concerned, Cutsinger's work was done: he had got them here and convinced them, finally, that they could dispose of those despised spacesuits, by which the integrity of Paleozoic ecosystems was to have been preserved. Cutsinger was gloweringly insistent upon the point or on any of a great many others, and Amy could only sit beside him, embarrassed, trapped by loyalty, until somebody found a way to change the subject. Then he sat mute but still

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glowering while the captain's other table guests held forth on a variety of less convoluted, certainly less controversial, topics. For her part, Amy had exhausted all conversational gambits and all plausible excuses to quit the table early and would now have foregone dinner altogether but for Cutsinger's insistence upon providing her with detailed summaries of conversation which he had found especially annoying and felt she ought not to have missed. Aboard the ship, there was no escape. Cutsinger had done no important work since his arrival, unless one counted as important his desultory progress on a book for general readers, a follow-up to his unexpectedly and immensely successful *Events Leading to the Infinite Regress*. Amy knew — because she was the person actually performing the work of editing his notebooks and lectures into approximate book form — that he had nothing new to say about the truly important work he had done early on. Cutsinger had no interest in the Paleozoic *per se*, only in the connection between the prehistoric and the modern worlds. He viewed the great majority of the scientists whom he had ushered into and out of the anomaly — a hundred different varieties of geo- and bio-specialist — as a bus driver might view bus passengers, caring neither whence they had come nor what they might do once delivered to their destinations; nor did he want to be bothered with what they might have to say while in his charge, either. They repaid his disinterest with passive contempt, regarding him as the doorman, the gatekeeper: The Wizard of Time had become a professional greeter. The only scientists with whom he felt an affinity and acknowledged kinship were the astronomers, but they were few in number compared with the earth scientists, the turnover among them was generally quite rapid — they tended to stay only a few weeks, if that long, to make their observations, then returned home to spend months, perhaps years, analyzing the data they had collected.

And Cutsinger was impatient with the Navy officers, found them intellectually unstimulating, their personalities rather drearily similar, their routines, regulations, and rituals, petty and childish.

Yet, as he had got into the habit of remarking, most human interaction is talk, all the rest incidentals, and thus he depended on Amy for a great deal in the way not only of the definite services she performed for him, but also in the indefinite purpose she served by being almost constantly at his side, attending his every word. "You are my sounding

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board for ideas," he sometimes reminded her, "my confidante," but, any more, she could not help thinking, I am only your audience, as anonymous as any other audience. And he had no ideas any more, only beliefs.

Amy had been with him since just before the series of events leading to the purely serendipitous discovery of the anomaly. Once — she recalled this rather vaguely now, like an old dream or something that she had read in an unmemorable book — she had been pursuing her own course, a career in physics quite independent of Cutsinger's; she had had friends, lovers, a sense of humor, all the accouterments of A Life. Now she had a career in Cutsinger, and increasingly, especially whenever she had retired to her cabin, she found herself wondering what it might be like to have anything in addition to him, anything at all that had nothing at all to do with him.

THEN, ONE EVENING, alone in her gray impersonal cabin deep within the ship, as she began to prepare herself for yet another evening's ordeal, she considered her reflection in the inadequate mirror over the tiny metal sink. She had always freckled excessively at the touch of sunlight, but sunlight had scarcely touched her fair skin in — how long had it been? Long enough, she thought, for her flesh to have become greenish white like a frog's belly. Charming, she thought. Good thing the batrachian complexion's in this year. There were lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth which she was certain she had never seen before. Undressed, she thought, I look fat and rumpled. She regarded her small wardrobe; its contents seemed as colorless as the cabin. Almost at random, she picked something and put it on, then tried to gauge the effect in the mirror. Dressed, she thought, smoothing the dress across her belly, in this ridiculous dress, I look rumpled and fat.

Still, there was nothing to be done for it. She resigned herself to that absurd table, on this ugly ship, in this godawful time and place. Oh, the incongruity, and she repressed either a smile or a groan — she could not decide which. And the decisions. Fish or meat? White wine or red? Kill myself, or somebody else?

Some time must necessarily pass between the perception of unhappiness and its being given utterance. Certain individuals seem scarcely to

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hesitate between the two; others, however long they may live, do not live long enough to find their voices. Amy, like most people, occupied a position between these poles of almost reflexive complaint and mute abiding wretchedness; but she tended toward the latter extreme. It had taken her many days, or several weeks, or a few months — she considered each unit of time measurement to see which cast her situation in the light least unflattering to herself — to determine that she was more miserably unhappy than she had ever imagined possible. She had always accepted, at least in theory, that people were responsible for their own happiness; she had set aside that responsibility because other possibilities seemed more pressing, seemed worthier; early on, it had seemed to her that her own best prospect for happiness inarguably lay in her being somehow indispensable to Cutsinger. There was The Work to consider, The Great Adventure, the bold new chapter to be written in the annals of science, in which she did not wish to appear as an unsympathetic character.

But no more. If it had taken her a long time, "four hundred million years and some months," as she bitterly put it to herself, to acknowledge her own intense dissatisfaction, she was ready to express it and to want to alleviate it. On their way from the mess, she told Cutsinger without preamble that she was taking some time off, at least a day, maybe two days, maybe more, she didn't know but she was definitely going ashore, she needed time to herself, she was going crazy — she had thought it out during the night, composed what she had to say, mentally rehearsed it, but all her preparation came to nothing, or, rather, she achieved her end but at the cost of further damage to her self-esteem. Like an avalanche, unstoppable, relentless, it impelled her forward and almost immediately downward into trembling and tears. He only looked at her in astonishment tinged with horror, his expression eloquent with the unspoken question: Where did *this* come from? Crying and shaking, she saw him glance toward the porthole. Beyond lay the limitless sky, the unpredictable sea, the septic, treacherous world. She heard him say, "Yes, yes, of course, by all means, go," granting her leave not because he suddenly understood how she felt but because he wanted to avoid a scene.

She saw him shiver there, and again, later, in the boat bay. The boat bay was a large steel grotto, and Cutsinger was visibly uncomfortable there: any moment, the great gate might swing open, exposing him to the

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external world. Her composure somewhat restored by his swift acquiescence — though she knew that it had been given not out of understanding and compassion, but to avoid being embarrassed by a public display he patently considered to be out of character for her — Amy nodded to him, then stepped down into the boat and found a place for her sea bag and herself among the carefully stowed crates and equipment.

In the instant that the boat moved out of the boat bay, into the sunlight, she felt as though the weight of the ship had been lifted from her shoulders. Light reflected from the surface of the water dazzled her. The bluejackets themselves were much improved in this natural illumination: pallid drones no more, they appeared fresh, vital, even beautiful.

On impulse she spoke to the nearest of them. "The water looks very inviting." The young man seemed almost startled. She ventured a smile.

"Uh, I don't think so, ma'am. It's not safe."

"Why not?"

"Sea scorpions," he said, "and other things, ma'am. Well, so I hear."

The boat touched the crude jetty, and after a moment's hesitation the bluejacket to whom she had spoken offered a hand to help her out. Here she looked back once at the gray ship sitting in the bay and realized with a start that this was her first sight of it as an entire object, rather than as an environment, since before the transfer. The sight of it called up a memory which she could not quite give form in her mind; she knew only that it was unpleasant, whatever it was, and shrugged it away. She wanted to bring no unhappiness ashore with her.

A work detail fell to unloading the crates and equipment from the boat and moving them along the jetty to add them to a small mountain range of crates and equipment along the shore. Other work details, moving with all the purposefulness of social insects, were engaged in carrying away the substance of this mountain range and assembling it into Quonset huts, vehicles, machinery. There were many more people in uniform than not, she noticed, and she wondered where most of the civilian scientists had got to. Then she glimpsed, on the rocky heights behind the camp, tiny human figures making their ways, singly or in small groups, across the steep rock face, and she thought, Of course. They were getting on with what they had come here to do, while the Navy, acting in its support capacity, built a base for them.

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She realized with dismay that she did not know what to do next. She had come ashore uncommitted to any particular course of action but conscious of the need for a change of scenery, perhaps even for catharsis, and half-determined on some arduous physical recreation. She wore hiking shoes and carried in her bag, along with essential toiletries, a modest and now useless one-piece swimsuit. Aimlessly, she walked about the camp. The few civilians whom she encountered acknowledged her presence with nods and smiles but clearly had no idea who she might be; just as clearly, they were too busy to be very curious about her. The bluejackets were intent on their assigned duties; as a work detail assembled pipes into showers and erected walls around the showers, she watched, wholly fascinated, and when they stopped and stepped back to take stock of their handiwork, she looked at her watch and was astonished to see how much time had elapsed. She could almost hear Cutsinger asking her how she had spent her day ashore and almost see the contempt on his face as she fumbled for a meaningful answer. Then she told herself angrily, I'm not here for his sake.

Still, feeling it a point of honor to prevent her excursion's reneging on its initial promise, she resumed her aimless and now slightly desperate wandering. At length she found herself picking her way up the rough slope behind the camp. She did not climb very far before settling onto a shelflike limestone projection. Despite or perhaps because of the human figures she had seen on it, the dark landscape before her looked even more forbidding close up than it had from the ship. She realized, too, how out of condition she was. Could've been using the ship's gym all this time, she thought. Nevertheless, she felt — she had to think about it for a second — *good*. For ever so long she had been aware of an iron-hard knot of tension at the base of her skull; now, as she began to relax, the tension yielded to a burning soreness in the muscle. It hurt, yet it made her feel better. She gazed down on the camp and its scurrying inhabitants and then out to sea. Again, the sight of the ship filled her with dread; she instantly looked away. Somewhere far out to sea, farther than she could see, the surface would be matted with graptolites drifting through planktonic soup. No scurrying there, she thought, dinner just floats by one's door.

She felt distinctly at a loss. The idea of returning to the ship was repugnant, but not only had her plans for recreation amounted only to

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vague and now unrealizable notions of hiking and swimming, she had made no arrangements for accommodations. She began to realize that she was famished; she had been too upset to eat breakfast on the ship, had given no thought to eating when she escaped — and the perplexing half-memory returned for a moment, but she still could not grasp it, frowned it away, concentrated on her hunger. It was a good hunger. Eating had been a mechanical exercise for so long that she had forgotten what it was to have a real appetite. She could, she decided, probably eat at the mess tent in the camp, and she imagined other necessary facilities would be available as well. She would need a place to sleep, but finding a bunk on short notice might be an insurmountable matter. The idea of sleeping beneath the stars briefly attracted her. Then she thought of the sea scorpions "and other things" inhabiting the area. She had seen specimens of grotesque arthropods brought aboard the ship, and it now required no great effort of imagination to conjure chitinous night-feeding predators swarming ashore — she quickly shoved the image from her mind and told herself that the creatures could not pose too much of a threat to human beings ashore. She could recall hearing no horror stories along such lines, anyway; perhaps there was nothing in camp to interest sea scorpions — not even cockroaches to eat. Yet, she concluded, discretion was undoubtedly the better part of valor.

The camp appeared to have increased in size in the short time she had been away from it. She judged from the aroma that Navy cooks were preparing to serve the evening meal. The mess tent was full of tired, hungry bluejackets and civilians ready to call it a day. She fell into the mess line. The food was standard fare, slightly tough chicken fresh from the freezer, with side orders of reconstituted vegetables, but Amy discovered that she was ravenously hungry and ate every bite. She wished for a glass of white wine, or even, she thought with a smile, grog, whatever that might be.

"Why, hello!"

She looked up and saw the man who had been head of the sleep-disorder center at Cornell University's New York Hospital in Westchester County.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Please do."

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He sat opposite her and began to saw at his chicken.

"Do you mind my asking," Amy said, "what you *are* doing here? The night I met you, on the ship, you said something about observing the observers."

"Actually, I am building the case that the clocks and calendars and other time-keeping devices on which we depend, back in the twenty-first century, and which we have imported into this Paleozoic environment, aren't just useless here, but injurious."

"How so?"

"The Siluro-Devonian year is about four hundred days long. The Siluro-Devonian day is about twenty-two and one half hours long. It's all wrong for our human bodies, which evolved during Quaternary time. The dominant time cycle of our bodies is the circadian rhythm. From the Latin words *circa*, approximately, and *dies*, day. For most of us the circadian cycle is twenty-five hours long, plus or minus a quarter of an hour. This body clock is located in the brain's hypothalamus, lying above the roof of the mouth. But we also have a weekly cycle of internal rhythms regulating rise and fall of heartbeat and blood circulation, our immune system's response patterns, changes in body chemicals. When we ignore or abuse these rhythms in the course of twenty-first-century life — and we do it all the time, obeying the clock on the wall instead of the clocks in our bodies — we feel the effects of sleep deprivation. We have the Monday morning blues and get drowsy in the afternoon. We suffer from sleep disorders and depression. We become irritable and clumsy and, well, stupid. Then we compound our problems by trying to offset our fatigue by using drugs and alcohol. We take stimulants to keep ourselves awake during the workday, and drink or take sleeping pills to knock us out at night so we can get up the next morning and take more stimulants. It's very unhealthful."

He looked at her as he chewed. Then: "May *I* ask what *you* are doing here?"

"Everybody here knows what he's doing here," Amy said, "except me."

After dinner, she said good night to the sleep-disorder specialist and returned to the communal tent where she had managed to secure a place to pass the night ashore. She sat outside on a campstool and admired the emerging stars for a time. The whole camp seemed to droop in the still,

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humid twilight. Without warning, a large, somehow familiar shape emerged from the gathering shadows. At first it struck Amy that one of the smaller tents had decided to go for a walk. Then the apparition resolved itself into the author. He drew up before her and favored her with a clearly tipsy grin.

"I think," she told him, "you had better sit down. You're leaning well out of plumb, you know. Another few degrees of tilt out of true, and you're going to roll down into the bay."

"Drink?" he said, holding up a bottle of Scotch.

Amy thought it over for two seconds before answering, "Don't mind if I do." She fetched plastic cups and another camp stool from within the tent; the author sat down like an elephant taking a load off all four feet and poured Scotch into the cups.

"Here's to Robert Heinlein," he said as they clicked cups.

"Who?"

"Twentieth-century science-fiction author."

"Ah."

"Yep." He popped the syllable from his mouth and raised his cup again. "And all the rest of them, too. Clarke, Asimov, Bradbury. Here's to the by-God living literature."

"So," Amy said after half a minute had passed, "do you, as a sci-fi writer, find it hard to come up with story ideas?"

"Probably no more than anyone did back in the space age. When events catch up with fiction, you just have to push on a little farther out in front."

"And do you write happy endings?"

"When I can. All stories, all kinds of stories, are about people trying to be happy. A few of them manage to pull it off. But you know what's disheartening about science fiction?"

"What?"

"What's disheartening is when events don't bother to catch up. I expected us to have colonies on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn by now. Research stations. I mean, things like that were supposed to happen in my lifetime. And we'd go *on* from there. Ever onward and outward. Eventually, somehow or other, Einstein be damned, we'd whip together some warp-drive thingumatron and leave the solar system behind, spread throughout the galaxy. Manifest destiny."

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"Not so manifest if you're a physicist."

He looked at her curiously. "Ever visit one of the space stations, back, you know, home?"

"No."

"Well, I did. There're rides at Disney World that're more exciting. Same here."

"Even so. There can't be too many sci-fi writers who can say they've actually done any of the things they like to write about. Space travel, now time travel. Time travel in heavy quotes. You're like a hero in one of your own stories, almost."

"I hope not!" He scowled. "Willingly or otherwise, writers tend to buy into myths about writers. Fitzgerald bought into the myth of writer as drunkard and drank himself to death. Hemingway bought into the myth of writer as man's man. He hunted and fished and boxed and finally blew his own head off. And here I'm a space-traveler *and* a time-traveler. Space travel's always held much greater fascination for me than time travel. In or out of heavy quotes. Because space travel was possible. Time travel was *im*possible. All you physicists said so yourself. And, you know, I think — and there're folks I know at NASA and the Jet Propulsion Lab and places who think so, too — the discovery of the spacetime anomaly's the worst thing that ever happened. Just an absolute goddamn disaster."

"You're trampling on my field now," she warned, but gently.

"No offense. But the human race was meant to go to the stars. Not sideways in time."

"Meant to? Manifest destiny again?"

"*Priorities*. We've got our priorities all wrong. There must be some happy balance between the hopes of the future and the realities of the present. We just don't seem to be able to achieve it. And another thing. Time travel's too private. Everybody and his dog could watch those rockets take off. People come from all over. It was for everybody. But time travel? Feh! It's like when they stopped public executions and did it behind prison walls, in seclusion. Like they were ashamed of it."

The author looked uncomfortable with his own analogy but was slightly too inebriated to figure out why. He pressed on.

"The combined pressure of expanding population, diminishing resources, and simple human curiosity — aspiration, whatever you want to

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call it — was supposed to launch us at the stars and the future. Instead, we're mucking around here in the so-called prehistoric past and haven't even started planning habitats for ourselves at El-Four and El-Five. Most people just can't see the point any more. There's a push on for a land rush into Paleozoic time. Never mind the lack of soil, plant cover, animals. Even some of my colleagues think it's an excellent idea. Hell, one of them told me, this world is practically terraformed already — we can import the plants and animals we need. Oh, the geoscience types would still be able to study their creatures in special preserves. But they can't, they mustn't be greedy. The Paleozoic's a distraction from our true destiny. One giant step sideways."

"There's another way of looking at it," said Amy. "From the very first, we physicists explained over and over again that we're not talking about time travel, but about traveling from one universe to another."

"It's *hard* to give up the stars. It isn't just the funding, though it is the funding, of course. It's the public imagination. Such as it is. People can't seem to hold more'n one great big idea in their minds at a time. Space travel or time travel. Well, we already have time travel, or the closest thing to it. And the idea's also started to penetrate that we'll never get to even the nearest star fast enough, soon enough, to suit anybody. Stars are unreachable unless we're willing to spend thousands and even tens of thousands of years traveling interstellar distances at a crawl."

"Don't use that accusing tone with me," Amy said. "It's not physics' fault there's no way to exceed light speed."

"You people could at least have the decency to find some kind of short-cut in spacetime. A gateway through hyperspace via black holes."

"We certainly know now that spacetime anomalies exist, but whether we'll ever find one that can take us to the stars — it may be a chimera. Like El Dorado. Or, more aptly, like the Northwest Passage. Not to belittle the effort behind this expedition, particularly since some of it was my own effort, but it's nothing compared to getting people to Mars and back. This world for all practical purposes *is* the Earth, complete to potable water, breathable atmosphere, UV-screening ozone layer, and fifteen p.s.i. at sea level. You can go into the jump station in Houston at nine o'clock in the morning and eat lunch at noon in Gondwana and be back home in time for dinner at six."

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"*If*," the author said glumly, "you don't get concussed coming or going."

"Practically speaking, though, getting here's a snap compared to getting to Mars and back."

"Pity nobody ever figured out how John Carter wished himself to Mars."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

Later, more than a little drunk, as she composed herself for sleep, she thought, In the morning I'll be back in the real world. Eventually, I have to return to the ship, there'll be work for me to do, another few pages of the book to thrash out at the very least. And she was curious to see how Cutsinger had managed without her. Perhaps it would lead to his appreciating her more. Probably not. However her absence might discommode him, she could not conceive of his venturing ashore to reclaim his errant flunky, or for any other reason; she could scarcely imagine that he would obey the captain's order to abandon ship if it were foundering. Her relationship with the great man, she reflected, was less a relationship between two people than a sort of barycenter, the center of mass in the Cutsinger-Stevenson system. And I can't escape from the system. I not only have to orbit Cutsinger, I have to keep my face turned toward him at all times....

I can see it all. Standing on the jetty, with the boat waiting to take people back to the ship. The boatman says to me, Ma'am, it's time to shove off, please come aboard, and the ship waits like a great iron prison out on the water to receive me —

The *hulks*, she thought with a start, that's what I've been trying to remember. The derelict ships once used as floating prisons. Already she could feel the weight of the ship settling upon her; she could feel muscles in her face and shoulders contract with tension. No, she thought. No. No. Here is where the universe splits and I split with it. I do one thing in one universe and a different thing in the other. I don't know about that other self, I can't speak for her, but in this universe —

But in this universe it's too late. Time to go back to the ship. Cinderella's got to be in by a certain time or turn into a pumpkin.

Cutsinger, she thought, just might be waiting for her in the boat bay.

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She would ascend to him, and he would give her an ironic smile and say something like, "Did we have a good time?" but before she could frame a reply he would already be talking about something that really interested him. The walls of his world would first enclose her and then *close in* on her. She would look down, out the gate of the boat bay, to the black sea, the starshot sky, and the illuminated section of land wedged between them. Then the gates would slam shut, like the jaws of an immense monster.

I know it will happen that way, she thought. I can see exactly how it will happen, and I'll *let it* happen.

Right on schedule, because the Navy adhered rigorously to schedules in defiance of any slovenly Paleozoic notions about day and night, the boat pulled softly away from the jetty, moved out of the circle of illumination cast on the water, and vanished into an oily darkness.

"It," she said, and paused to consider her next words very carefully, and then shook her head and told the young man, "I'm sorry, I just don't have anything interesting to tell you. It wasn't my story."

"But you," the young man said, "he mentioned you in his autobiography just three times."

"I wrote most of Cutsinger's autobiography. Even then I knew how it was all going to end. He would live happily ever after, as he understood the word happily. He'd die full of years and full of honors. And by the time he died, everything that should be told about him would have been told." She shook her head. "I really, truly do not have anything to add."

"But *don't* you feel slighted?"

"I made my choices. Don't you worry about me. I, too, lived happily ever after."

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F&SF COMPETITION #75

"Rewrite-ku"

POETS HAD to retell a science fiction or fantasy story in the form of a Haiku, a Japanese poem where the first line is five syllables, the second line is seven syllables, and the third line is five syllables.

There were too many good ones to include here. Interestingly, S. Hamm noticed that Fredric Brown's "Knock" almost completely fits the Haiku form: "The last man on earth/Sits alone in a room. There's/A knock at the door."

NOTE: Always include your address, with your city, state, postal code, and if outside the United States, your country. No address = no fabulous prizes.

FIRST PRIZE:

"I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream" by Harlan Ellison

I learned the hard way
It's not nice to fool AM
But I won't complain.

—N. Diane Simpson
Detroit, MI

SECOND PRIZE:

"The Nine Billion Names of God" by Arthur C. Clarke

FOR I=1
TO N; RUN GOD_NAMES; NEXT I;
[stars going out]; DONE

—Keyan Bowes
San Francisco, CA

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

Nova by Samuel R. Delany

We're going to fly
Into a star's dying core.
But first, let's do drugs!

—Saladin Ahmed
Brooklyn NY

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by J. K. Rowling

"The Boy Who Lived" offed
"Him Who is Not to Be Named."
And I'm gay. Adjust.

—Esther M. Friesner
Madison, CT

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War of the Worlds by H. G. Wells
Intellects vast and cool
Saw the pamphlets, packed too fast,
Forgot their vaccinations.
—Mark Shainblum
Cote St. Luc, Quebec

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS:

Neanderthal Parallax by Robert J. Sawyer
Neanderthal, Eh?
Canadians will love you—
You're so much like them....
—Patrick J. O'Connor
Chicago, IL

Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang by Kate Wilhelm
Crushing on your cuz
Doesn't make the cloning of
Her any more fun.
—Todd Mason
Collingswood, NJ

"A Boy and His Dog" by Harlan Ellison
Post-apocalypse
Dog chow: hundred percent girl
And girl by-products.
—S. Hamm
San Francisco, CA

F&SF COMPETITION #76

CHILDISH THINGS: Before they became the luminaries they are today, many authors tried their hand at writing fiction when they were young. Unfortunately for them, but fortunately for us, some examples of their yet-to-bud talents have recently come to light.

Provide an example of an author's childish attempts at fiction. You have a maximum of six entries. Keep each entry under fifty words and make sure you tickle our funny bone. And, please, no crayons.

Example: *Jurassic Park* by Michael Crichton

There was this cool theme park with these great big dinosaurs, and suddenly the dinosaurs got out and ate everybody. Next time I hope they eat my sister.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by May 15, 2008. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a copy of *Lorelei of the Red Mist: Planetary Romances* by Leigh Brackett, compliments of Haffner Press. Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any Honorable Mentions will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition #76 will appear in the October 2008 issue.

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CURIOSITIES

ERNESTINE TAKES OVER, BY WALTER BROOKS (1935)

FRED and Ethel Thompson could be a younger version of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Mitty: Fred has erotic daydreams, but Ethel repeatedly punctures his fantasies and henpecks Fred while dragging him to the dull Manhattan parties of Winton Smith and other pompous neighbors.

At one such boring party, Fred imagines a beautiful female companion: shapely blonde Ernestine Darling. Suddenly, she appears beside him...and everyone else sees her too! Ernestine appeals so brazenly to Fred's virility, she soon has him literally swinging from the chandelier.

Ernestine swiftly grows real enough to acquire her own car, Greenwich Village apartment, and career as a painter. Yet she becomes whatever Fred and his male friends want her to be. To escape one awkward situation, Fred wishes Ernestine would acquire an impacted tooth: instantly, she does.

Ernestine's body is malleable, but her mind is definitely her own. One evening, while Fred is naked in the bath, she materializes beside him in a swimsuit...a moment before Ethel enters the bathroom. Next stop, divorce court.

Ernestine Takes Over is deeply in Thorne Smith territory, but has a touchingly romantic ending when Fred and Ethel learn to let fantasy cohabit with reality.

Walter Rollin Brooks (1886-1958) is best known for his children's books about Freddy the detective pig. Brooks's magazine stories about a talking horse named Ed spawned a popular sitcom. *Ernestine Takes Over* was his only adult fantasy novel. ☙

—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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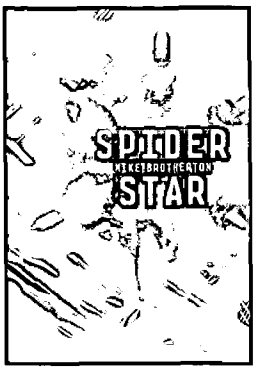

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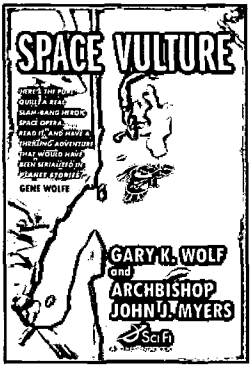

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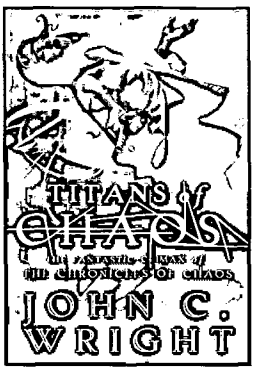

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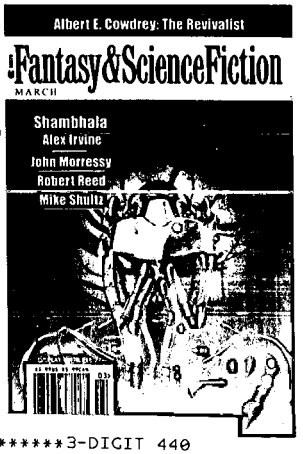

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